Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
8
ACES
Magical Girl
Raising Project

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ULURU
Is very good at lying.
SORAMI NAKANO
Knows what's inside things without opening them up.
MAGICAL GIRLS
PREMIUM SACHIKO
Can make someone incredibly lucky for a short while.
PATRICIA
Can render any enemy powerless with her magic handcuffs.
ARMOR ARLIE
The more hits she takes, the stronger she gets.

GLASSIANNE
Can see all sorts of places with her magical glasses.
BLUEBELL CANDY
Makes magical candies that can alter your feelings.
DARK CUTIE
Can manipulate shadows and silhouettes as if they're real.
MICCHAN THE DICTIONARY
Can change whatever she's holding into something else.
CQ ANGEL HAMUEL
Can speak directly into people's heads.

PRINCESS DELUGE
Fights enemies using the power of ice.
PFLE
Uses a magical wheelchair to race at intense speeds.
SNOW WHITE
Can hear the thoughts of those in need.
SHADOW GALE
Can power up machines by modifying them.
SHUFFLIN II
Her powers change depending on various suits and numbers.
RIPPLE
Can throw shuriken that always hit their target.

8

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YEN ON
New York

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Asari Endou

Translation by Jennifer Ward
Cover art by Marui-no

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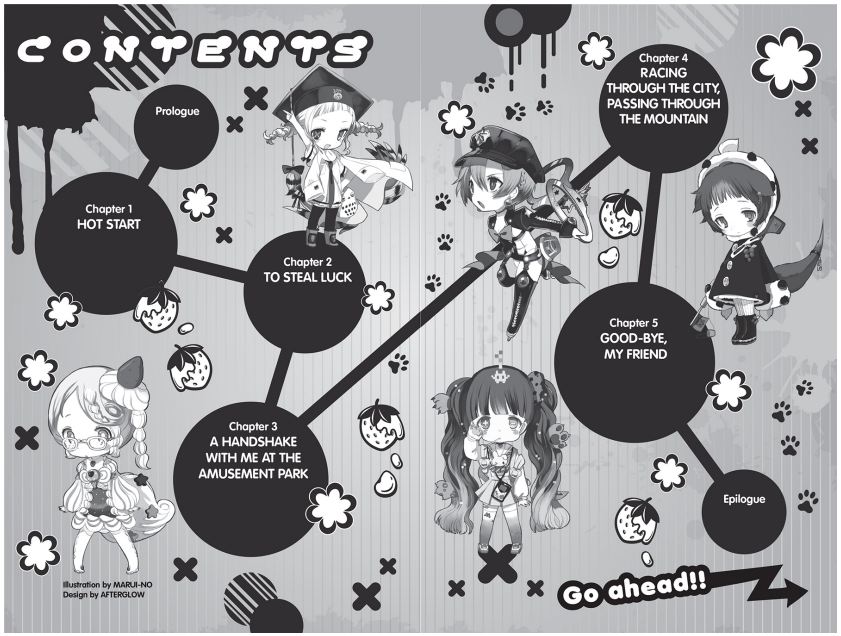
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Illustration by MARUI-NO
Design by AFTERGLOW

PROLOGUE

Kanoe was suspicious of Mamori. And her suspicions seemed to be increasing day by day.

Mamori Totoyama couldn't hide things from Kanoe Hitokouji, a girl who could determine someone's thoughts by reading their faces. And since Kanoe saw Mamori more frequently than even she saw her own family, interpreting her feelings from her expression was hardly any bother. She could pull it off with her eyes closed.

Until now, whenever Mamori had realized Kanoe had figured out she was hiding something, she had quickly given in. She knew from experience that all attempts at resistance were useless. If you knew you'd cave to the pressure and eventually raise the white flag, then it was best to surrender right away.

But this was the one time she couldn't do that.

The other day, robbers had forced their way into the secondary house on the Hitokouji estate. It had been made clear to Mamori that Kanoe Hitokouji—the magical girl Pfle—occupied an important position in the magical-girl world.

When a robber broke into the home of a highly esteemed individual, it was only natural that a proper investigation would follow. But Pfle had sensed there was something more behind all this. She had a hunch someone was using the investigation as pretext, and their true intention was to probe into her secrets.

Pfle had also noticed that the manner of the robber's intrusion had been unnatural. It didn't seem this was a simple extension of power struggles or someone who just wanted to take Pfle down. Those who engaged in dirty activity—Kanoe Hitokouji in particular—got strong hunches at times like these.

Pfle had been the one to initiate the "artificial magical-girl project." It was a big deal, something that was bound to shake the foundations of the Magical Kingdom, and she had thought perhaps that was what the culprit had been after. If someone powerful

enough to meddle with the investigation had learned of the plan somehow, then that person could have everything seized as a part of the investigation only to secretly take it for herself afterward. This was what Pfle most wanted to avoid.

She came to a decision quickly.

Before the investigation, Pfle had disposed of everything that could be used as evidence of anything shady. She'd also used magic to remove all her memories related to any sort of illicit activity so that she could act as an upstanding, unassuming individual fair and square. Her cover-up had kept her bad deeds from being exposed, and she'd gotten through safely.

Simultaneously, everything about the artificial magical-girl project from the technology to the current results had been anonymously made public—without leaving a single piece of evidence that would implicate Pfle, of course. As expected, there had been a great uproar, but doing this had avoided a situation where one party would illegitimately monopolize the technology.

During this series of cover-ups, Mamori—the magical girl Shadow Gale—had undertaken an important role.

Mamori had been entrusted with Pfle's memory crystal—or rather, it had been pushed on her. She'd been clearly instructed that she was to return the memories once everything had settled.

Pfle had anticipated that if she could just hide her memories, she could get through things for the time being. She'd been correct until halfway through the process, when Mamori, who'd secretly looked at the memories she'd been entrusted with, had decided she shouldn't return them. After agonizing over it, Mamori had entrusted the memories to another magical girl, Snow White, who was nicknamed the Magical-Girl Hunter. Pfle's life continued today without her lost memories, all the while feeling as if something was off.

This was what Mamori Totoyama—Shadow Gale—was hiding.

She didn't think everything Pfle was trying to do was bad. Pfle had ideals she clearly followed, and she was devoted to trying to change the stagnating and rotten Magical Kingdom.

But for the sake of those goals, Pfle believed the ends justified the means. If she thought bringing together a hundred magical-girl candidates to challenge an evil magical girl would be less efficient than obeying the evil magical girl to kill those hundred, she would, without hesitation, choose the latter. The closer Pfle got to her

goals, the more sacrifices she would make. Someone had to stop her. And no one else could—no one but Shadow Gale, who had been entrusted with her memories.

Mamori wasn't stopping Kanoe for the sake of those who might die. The way Mamori saw it, Kanoe, struggling toward her goal, was in terrible danger. Even if she were to make it through this episode, it was clear that eventually she would go off the rails somewhere and crash. If Kanoe had been driven to the point where she was forced to entrust her memories to another, Mamori could assume Pfle was so close to the edge that it wasn't a step away—it was a mere half step.

At any rate, Mamori wasn't giving Kanoe's memories back. This was the one time that no matter how much pressure Kanoe put on her, no matter what sorts of sly traps she set, Mamori swore to herself she would never reveal it. She wouldn't return Kanoe's memories. If worst came to worst, she was prepared to bite off her own tongue.

Despite having left as few discrepancies in her memory as possible, Kanoe still sensed something was off—but nothing more than that. She used various techniques to try to probe into what Mamori was hiding, from leading questions to bribery attempts. No matter what, Mamori never said a word.

The problems started here. Even if Mamori never said a word, that didn't necessarily mean Kanoe wouldn't figure things out based on hypothesis and insight. Or, rather than "necessarily," it would be wise to assume that the time was coming ever closer.

Holding Kanoe's memories was nothing more than a stopgap measure. At the end of the day, it only delayed the inevitable. Having this gap in Pfle's memory was unwise, and depending on the actions of the party who had sent those burglars to attack the secondary house, they could end up in even more danger. Mamori knew she had to come up with something, but she couldn't think of anything worthwhile. Kanoe was the one who came up with good plans, but she was the one person Mamori couldn't discuss this with.

Shadow Gale didn't have much in the way of friends. She essentially had no connections. Even her number of acquaintances was few enough to count on one hand. And if you subtracted people who might be accomplices in Pfle's plots, that number decreased even further.

She wanted to keep Clantail out of matters of this nature as much as possible. Mamori wanted to keep her away from anything even vaguely dirty, like deceiving people and entrapping people. She wanted the girl to focus on becoming a zoologist.

That left Snow White as the only one she could talk to. The way things had wound up, it felt like she was entrusting the memories to Snow White just to drag her into this. Mamori felt so bad about that, she wanted to disappear, but no matter how she racked her brain, there was no one else she could ask for help.

Then one day when Mamori kept writing and rewriting Snow White a message, feeling more and more without recourse, Kanoe summoned her out to the courtyard, where she, transformed into Pfle, sat with a magical girl Mamori had never seen before.

"This is Patricia," Pfle introduced her. "Patricia, this is Mamori."

The stranger greeted her. "Hello, hello, good to meetcha."

"Oh, yes, good to meet you…," Mamori replied. "Miss, who might this be?"

"I already told you. This is Patricia."

"No, that's not what I mean."

"I've entrusted her with your personal security."

"Pardon?"

Pfle had told her how the burglary incident at the estate's second house remained unresolved, and that they hadn't even captured the lackeys who'd been sent to do it. The entrance of the house was cordoned off by yellow tape, and to that day, magical girls were still stationed at the Hitokouji residence under the pretense of security. Furthermore, it seemed Mamori was hiding something from her—everything was unsettling.

After saying her piece as she pleased, Pfle's mouth relaxed into a smile. "So I figure I'll assign you a guard as well…being that I haven't even properly grasped what the danger is."

Patricia cheerfully proffered her right hand. Stunned, Mamori offered her own in response. Patricia squeezed her hand so hard it made Mamori wince.

CHAPTER 1
HOT START

◇ **Fal**

The origins of the Magical Kingdom were, of course, in the kingdom records. But how many people out there could guarantee those records were correct? Inconvenient truths would be omitted or corrected or perhaps twisted entirely in the opposite direction, leaving what was written there only a legitimate nation where nothing underhanded or anything to feel guilty about existed at all.

As for the origins of the Magical Kingdom, the records said as follows:

There was the First Mage, who had created everything in existence. This mage also created three disciples and taught the trio everything they knew and were capable of. Based on the teachings they had learned, the three disciples made a world, and using that world as their base, they furthered their exchange with various other worlds. Seeing that their three disciples and the world they had made was now fully matured, the First Mage was very satisfied. The mage figured things were such that they were no longer needed and so entrusted everything to their three disciples before suddenly vanishing.

That the people involved in this episode of the nation's establishment were still alive could be considered unusual for these sorts of foundational tales. But when the only people to say "*This was something that really happened*" were those who claimed to be the ones in question, the Three Sages, you were bound to feel reservations about their trustworthiness.

Regardless, the story's veracity wasn't all that important. What was important was that the three disciples called the Three Sages

were, to the Magical Kingdom, the heroes of the nation's founding and also its greatest powers and not people a single magical girl could oppose.

Fal was terribly anxious. He'd probably be dry-mouthed and sweating bullets, maybe even light-headed and puking from stress, were he not an electronic fairy-type mascot. Snow White, however, showed no sign of nerves. Her heart rate was a little elevated but still within the normal range—that of somebody reasonably alert.

From the outside, this estate looked big and luxurious, but upon entering, it was quite strangely a traditional-style Japanese house. The wooden floorboards in the halls creaked slightly when you put weight on them; rows of shoji paper sliding doors let faint light seep through; the thick alcove posts had little nicks; and the tatami mats were still green and fresh-smelling. Gravel blanketed the yard with white stepping-stones crossing over it. The gravel was dyed in metallic colors of red, blue, white, black, green, and yellow, with a wealth of fluorescent colors and variations that were a terrible eyesore. Instead of stone lanterns, there were randomly scattered structures resembling upside-down totem poles. Planted in the garden was the sort of stately tree so enormous it brought to mind Yggdrasil, the world tree, or something of that nature. It was so massive that ten people holding hands might barely be able to circle the trunk. The giant tree had not been visible from outside the wall. Normally, a person could have spotted something of that size from three miles away.

That alone was enough to make Fal understand quite well that this place existed in a realm beyond common sense. And someone who called a place like this her home had invited them. Since that person was one of the Three Sages, Snow White could not refuse.

"Go ahead, have some," the owner of the house said to Snow White, who was sitting on her knees in front of the low tea table. On the table there was a cup of cola and a snack bowl filled with potato chips.

Not long ago, Snow White had outmaneuvered a magical girl named Grim Heart, but not via direct injury. Grim Heart's magic prevented such things, though she was someone Fal would have liked to physically harm, if possible. But still, even if Snow White hadn't hurt her, good things had not happened to Grim Heart. After Snow White had outplayed her, she'd been arrested, and while being escorted away, she had "died in an accident." Fal didn't know

what had actually happened to her, but that was what was recorded in the Magical Kingdom documents that were accessible to him.

Grim Heart had been the mortal incarnation of one of the Three Sages, Chêne Osk Baal Mel. And Puk Puck, the one who had summoned Snow White, was a magical girl and the incarnation of another of the Three Sages, Av Lapati Puk Baltha. Being summoned by the incarnation of one of the Three Sages was essentially no different from being summoned by one of the Three Sages themselves.

Snow White did not help herself to the cola or the potato chips. She only closely watched the girl sitting opposite her.

The girl looked young, even for a magical girl. Younger than elementary school age—not quite a kindergartner, or maybe she was a toddler. She was sitting informally, with her legs sort of crossed on a thick cushion. Her costume, a white toga and curly golden hair, gave her a vaguely divine air. Her smile was pure and innocent, and she seemed gentle in a way that drew you in unawares. But still Snow White's expression remained stern. She wasn't the type to laugh or flatter to try to entreat herself to people, but considering who this person was, Fal wished Snow White would at least be friendlier.

"You're not gonna have any?"

"What was it you wanted to discuss?"

Fal was on edge. Snow White cut in so close, it wasn't clear whether Puk Puck was done talking or not. It also came off like an assertion she was not going to talk anything but business.

But even after witnessing this, the girl continued to smile brightly. "If you tell Puk your favorite snacks, we can get you some."

"What's your businesses with me?"

From the garden came the loud *clunk* of a scaredeer.

"Um…Puk wants to be friends with you, Big Sis Snowy."

"Why is it you've called me here today?"

Beyond a sliding screen, a magical girl moved. Fal hadn't seen her—he had detected her with radar. There was Snow White, plus Puk Puck in front of her, then one other in waiting behind that screen. She was probably Puk Puck's subordinate. If something was to happen to her master, she would quickly rush in to eliminate the problem.

That was what had moved. Fal became even more tense.

Thoughts rose in his mind and then disappeared. Should he caution Snow White, at least, and say, "*Wouldn't it be best to speak a little gentler to her, to be more respectful?*" Or would it perhaps be even ruder to interrupt in the middle of their discussion?

"So, so, Puk wanted to be friends with you, Big Sis." She leaned over the tea table, looking up at Snow White pleadingly. Snow White's heart rate rose. "And, and, um…"

"What am I here for?" Nothing had changed on the surface. But Snow White's heart rate had accelerated.

"Uh-huh, so Puk's—"

"What would you have me do?"

"…Hmm." Puk scratched her head with her middle finger. She looked sincerely troubled, just like that sound implied. With Snow White's ability to hear the thoughts of people in trouble, she would be able to see through any lies.

"Puk thinks this'll be good for both of us. You beat Grim Heart, right, Big Sis?"

So it was connected to that, after all.

"And the Osk Faction'll be watching you, too, right? And not only that, maybe they'll do something even worse? But then, but then, if we make friends, Puk can help you out, and Puk can protect you, y'know?" This was an invitation—she was saying, "*I'll back you, so join my faction*." She was using gentle language, but the actual content of her offer was considerably questionable.

Fal thought maybe they could trust this for what it was. Puk Puck's desire to integrate a capable magical girl who had struck a heavy blow to an enemy faction into her own was easy enough to understand. And even though Puk Puck's offer seemed sketchy, he felt he could trust her somehow.

"And plus, I can help you find your friend, Big Sis."

Snow White was indeed searching for Ripple, who was missing. But she'd always done the investigating privately. Fal was silently astonished Puk Puck had looked into Snow White so deeply. Snow White's heart rate rose even further, most likely because Ripple had been brought up.

"Pardon me." The paper screen door slid open. A magical girl stood there. Her long hair had gradations from brown to pink and was tied in pigtails that nearly reached the floor. Her eyes were different colors: The right was reddish-purple, and the left was pale blue. Her neck scarf was pinned with a rabbit badge, and stuffed

animal legs peeked out from her ponytails. She seemed like a composed sort of girl, but she was breathing hard, shoulders heaving.

"Let me introduce you, Big Sis. This is Sorami Nakano, one of Puk's friends. She analyzed for Puk a protected disc we stole from the Osk Faction, and thanks to her, we've learned that a lot of our info has gotten out. And you know, Sora and Puk are always good friends, like during dinner two days ago…"

"Pardon me," said Snow White, and Puk Puck looked at her with curiosity.

"What?"

"It looks like she's in a hurry."

Looking at Sorami Nakano, Puk Puck gave a little nod. That seemed to be a prompt, as Sorami began speaking, appearing rather relieved. "Yeah, I kinda am."

"What's wrong?" asked Puk Puck.

"It's Sachiko… Premium Sachiko ran away."

"…She ran away?"

"She left a note behind that said, '*I don't think I can manage such an important ceremony. I think it would be better not to do it at all, rather than causing trouble for you with my failure. I hope you can handle the rest…*' Well, basically, it's the usual."

Puk Puck put her hand to her forehead and looked up at the ceiling. It was the first gesture she'd revealed since Fal and Snow White had come into this room that gave a sense of experience inappropriate to the age she looked.

"Now of all times…," she murmured, seemingly thoughtlessly, and it sounded hoarse like an old woman.

Puk Puck heaved a great sigh and then turned back to Snow White. "Well, um, this is a little embarrassing, huh? So this is just a teensy-weensy bit hard to say, but if I'm gonna ask you a favor, then I have to say it, right? Yeah."

"Go ahead," said Snow White.

"Puk wants you to protect a friend."

Though she occasionally got sidetracked, Puk Puck continued, explaining the situation.

Puk Puck had some subordinate magical girls. She was planning to hold a magical ceremony, and one of the girls, Premium Sachiko, was a key figure involved. But another political force was against the ceremony.

“She’s got people after her… The Osk Faction,” said Puk Puck.

A slight crease formed in Snow White’s brow. The Osk Faction —the group of mages led by Chêne Osk Baal Mel. They saw both humans and magical girls as nothing more than experimental material, things to be used. That much had been made painfully clear to Snow White in the underground laboratory.

The Puk Faction was going to carry out this ceremony that relied on Sachiko. The decision to hold the ceremony had been made through a conference among the Three Sages, but the only party that had been against it, the Osk Faction, was ignoring the results of that meeting and planning to meddle in the ceremony. Basically, they couldn’t have the ceremony without Sachiko. So if she was eliminated, the majority decision wouldn’t count for anything.

“What sort of ceremony is this?” asked Snow White.

“Um, we can’t tell anyone else. But it’d be mean not to tell when Puk is asking you a favor, huh? If we make it so that you’re one of us now, Snowy, then Puk could tell you, huh? So then it’s okay for me to tell you?”

Fal got the feeling that what she was saying was cutting off all avenues of escape, but Snow White listened in silence without making any accusations.

With a proud ring in her voice, Puk continued. “Right now, the Magical Kingdom is in a real pinch. We’re using more power than we gather, and the power we stored up originally has been decreasing, bit by bit. The more difficult the magic is, the stronger the power needed. But when everyone is researching stuff and advancing technologies, things just wind up this way no matter what. Still, we can’t stop doing research and go back to how things were in the old days. At this rate, the power’ll be all gone, and it’ll be a big disaster. But now there’s this good thing. A long time ago, someone important—maybe you’ve heard of the First Mage—made a magical device, which stores up lots and looooots of magical power. In order to use it, you need a ceremony, and in order to hold that ceremony, we need our girl…Premium Sachiko.”

Even after listening to all this, Snow White did not react. Her heart rate remained elevated. This all sounded like utter nonsense, but if any of it had been lies, Snow White would have either pointed that out or silently stood from her seat. Maybe Fal should assume that since this was an incarnation of one of the Three Sages

speaking, even if it sounded like a wild tale, it really could be happening.

"Right now, Puk is setting up a barrier in order to protect Sacchi. But, but, before I could finish setting it up, she ran away… I'm sorry, Snowy Sis, but could you maybe bring her back? And if anyone comes after her…Puk wants you to protect her."

"Understood." Snow White's decision was instant.

Surprised, Fal wondered if he should say something but promptly judged he should not.

"Thank you, thank you!" Puk Puck cried as she took both Snow White's hands and shook them up and down. Then, taking Sorami with her, she pattered off down the hall at a run.

Snow White's vital signs slowed slightly.

The room was empty save for Snow White and Fal, who, without activating its hologram, asked Snow White, "What is it, pon? Should you be accepting so easily, pon?"

"It's okay," Snow White murmured. It sounded as if she was saying that to herself as she put her hands to her chest.

"Is it…?"

"I could hear her heart. Though when I heard I was going to be meeting directly with an incarnation of one of the Three Sages, I thought I wouldn't be able to hear it, like with Grim Heart." Snow White's pulse, which had begun to calm, rose again. "She's sincerely worried about the Magical Kingdom and honestly wants to save it through this ceremony. And she's worried about Premium Sachiko for her own sake, too, ceremony aside. As are the other magical girls, including that Sorami girl." Lowering her voice, she added, "As well as the one on the other side of the screen."

"You mean she's someone we can cooperate with, pon?"

"I…think so."

From the way Snow White was speaking, Puk Puck must have been sincere in her offer about Ripple, too. Since it seemed as if Snow White was deliberately avoiding talking about it, Fal didn't bring it up, either.

But more importantly, nothing would be more reassuring than allying with one of the Three Sages. Snow White had always simply taken down whatever villain was in front of her and never considered anything like a long-term outlook. To Fal, it looked as if she lived like she didn't care when she might die. She never collaborated with anyone; occasionally she'd work with a lone-wolf

independent of any organization, and even when she was in a group, she would stick out as “the Magical-Girl Hunter.”

Right as Fal was thinking, *If she could gain a trustworthy backer in Puk Puck right now…* they heard more footsteps coming from the hallway.

◇ Shadow Gale

The enemy attacked when Mamori was on her way to school. She had figured that if the sun started setting early, she might be attacked on the way home, but she’d never imagined she would be attacked first thing in the morning, right where people would see.

Her attacker was a magical girl whose entire body was fortified by armor with no openings or cracks. Her costume was boorish, lacking in the aesthetically pleasing elements that were characteristic of magical girls, and it looked to be very sturdy. In fact, even when punched or kicked, she didn’t seem to feel any damage at all as she advanced steadily and without a word. She had an unusually intimidating aura for such a petite figure. She fit a monster from a slasher film better than the term “magical girl.”

The magical girl who fought this armored girl was far more beautiful and extravagant, and most of all, bright with glaring lights.

Her costume was police officer–themed, subtracting the practicality while adding exposed skin and decoration. When she activated the police lights at her waist, the shine of the rotating flashers was dazzling. Though there was no siren sound, the lights aggressively emphasized her presence.

The armored girl did not flinch at the glare of the police lights as she thrust her fist forward, and the police girl, known as “Patricia,” wrapped the chain connected to her giant handcuffs around the enemy’s arm. The armored girl grabbed the chain on her arm and tried to yank it toward herself, but Patricia crouched down and dug in. Strength vied against strength, and the chain creaked.

Shadow Gale's arms tensed, and sounding pained, Patricia muttered, "You're stronger than I thought, Shadow."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Nah, I think that's probably a good thing. If I were to drop you by accident, the boss'd yell at me… Actually, it'd be way worse. I'd get rubbed out. Scary, huh?"

Shadow Gale squeezed tighter, clinging to Patricia. Given that right now, she was moving around fiercely while fighting off an assassin, the only place that could be considered safe was Patricia's back. There was a sense of security; like if she was here, Patricia would protect her. Shadow Gale didn't need anyone telling her—she did not plan to fall.

The girl in armor must have interpreted their idle chatter as a sign that they weren't taking her seriously; she pulled the chain even harder, and Patricia turned back to her. As they struggled, gradually the force on the chain increased, and their opponent took a firm step forward. Breathing in time with the paving stones that broke at her feet, Patricia slackened her grip, and the other magical girl swayed backward, staggering.

The armored girl lost her balance. Her upper body was flung way back, and she pitched to the rear, ready to fall. Patricia stepped forward. As the armored girl fell, she kicked at Patricia's chin, but Patricia turned aside to avoid it and took another step forward to punch the enemy in the face with the handcuff clenched in her right hand, as if she had brass knuckles. However, these were magic handcuffs. They were sturdier than anything—they would never break or bend. And using them was a magical girl with real muscle, punching with all her strength.

Patricia sent the armored magical girl flying; she cracked the pavement as she bounced. This time, Patricia was airborne right behind her, punching the girl in the back. She crushed the sturdy armor, her strike penetrating to what lay within. The armored girl still never made a sound, trying to twist away, but now Patricia hit her with a third punch that fired her backward, parallel to the ground. The blow knocked her straight into a bench, breaking it clean in two and ripping up some lilac bushes, earth and all, before she was caught by a thick chain-link fence and finally came to a stop. Before Shadow Gale's very eyes, Patricia wrenched the fence

up, peeling it out to break off its poles right from the middle.

Patricia was already behind the chain-link fence, waiting. She was so terrifyingly fast; she even outstripped the one she'd sent flying with her own punch. She hit once, twice more with the magic handcuffs, and when the armored girl staggered, this time, Patricia swung the chain to strike her, sending the armored girl to her knees.

Shadow Gale wasn't any good at fighting, but even she understood how strong Patricia was. Of all the people Shadow Gale had ever met, the first thing that came to mind when she thought of who Patricia reminded her of was the Great Dragon she'd fought inside the game.

Even as Patricia was mindful of Shadow Gale on her back, she nevertheless overwhelmed her opponent. And the armored girl was no pushover, either. Despite having taken so many hits, she was actually trying to stand up. Something like black mud oozed from the gaps in her armor and was trying to support her body. Gradually, the black mud covered the armor. Shadow Gale gulped. The mud covered the dents, thickening the armor further, changing its shape, making it bigger—

"No more of that."

The chain flew. Patricia's giant handcuffs encircled the armor's neck and legs with a clink. The armored girl stopped moving, and the black mud shivered wildly before receding into the cracks.

"It was the way you were moving, y'know?" said Patricia. "Like how you were trying to take hits before the counterattack. So then I'd just have to put a stop to that before you could strike back. Once my cuffs are on you, no one can resist, not a magical girl or a demon."

Shadow Gale lifted her head. Sirens were gradually approaching from the distance—either police cars or an ambulance. After all this rampaging through the streets, someone in the neighborhood must have called emergency services.

"Whoa… That was close. Thank you so much. Anyway, let's get out of—"

Before Shadow Gale could finish thanking her, Patricia dashed off, and Shadow Gale hastily clung to her. Patricia had broken into such a sudden run, it yanked Shadow Gale's head backward. It was hard enough that if she'd been human, it might have given her whiplash.

“Wh-what’s going on all of a sudden?” asked Shadow Gale.

“I’m not getting a response from the other girls.”

“Huh?”

“I contacted the boss, but even if we do get backup, I dunno if it’d even be in time, y’know?” Running as she tapped away on her magical phone, Patricia swiftly dropped it into the bag hanging from her waist. She kept on running from road to road, going along the walls of residences, legs never stopping all the while.

“All your subordinates are strong, right, Patricia?”

“I mean, I guess so? We do this kinda work because people think we are, so I’m fairly confident in that, y’know?”

If Patricia was acknowledging them, then Shadow Gale figured they had to be strong. Just moments ago, until Shadow Gale had actually seen her in battle, she hadn’t thought Patricia was that good. However, witnessing that fight forced her to appreciate Patricia’s abilities to be a bodyguard.

When Pfle had assigned her as Shadow Gale’s guard, Patricia’s strangely familiar attitude had only made Shadow Gale more irritated with her. In any case, she didn’t seem to mean any harm and looked to be a pretty decent person for a lackey of Pfle’s. And the secondary house had in fact been attacked, so it was no wonder Pfle would be cautious. Shadow Gale had figured she had no choice; whenever she went outside, Patricia had always come with her.

Then she had been attacked on her way to school. The armored magical girl had struck leading a group of eerie black creatures, heedless that it was the middle of the day and people were passing by. Shadow Gale on her back, Patricia had fled while their reinforcements, over ten magical girls with weapons, had appeared from the shadows of buildings, from between the people trying to escape, and from the tops of telephone poles, and begun fighting off the black shadows. One magical girl sliced at a shadow with a sword, and the shadow blocked it with wings like blades while another swooped down to attack, and the magical girl dodged to the side to evade it. Magical girls went back-to-back to defeat the enemies in the skies above as the shadows attacked in coordinated groups.

While exchanging fierce blows with the armored magical girl chasing close behind her, Patricia traveled a long way. And with each new place she came to, there was more destruction.

Patricia had been constantly guarding Mamori. When she’d

followed her to a new ramen shop that had opened up in the neighborhood, she had spoken disparagingly of it in quiet tones: "The *char siu* here smells kinda rotten, doesn't it? It does, right?" Then she'd followed Mamori when she went to the pharmacy to buy medicine: "Stomach medicine is essential when you're around our boss, huh?" she'd laughed. And as they'd swayed on the train, she'd asked Mamori questions like, "So do you have a crush on anyone at school?" with a rather disinterested expression, considering her tone. No matter where Shadow Gale went, Patricia would always follow. When Mamori was not Shadow Gale, but Mamori Totoyama, Patricia would follow in human form—she was a young woman who was cooler than she was cute—which gave Mamori pause: *Can she really protect me in this form?*

Maybe she'd been able to return to her human form because she'd had her subordinates with her at all times. Shadow Gale hadn't been informed of the presence of the subordinates, either. Over ten magical girls who could fight with weapons was no small matter. Pfle had clearly anticipated that "something" would happen.

Kanoe had lost a part of her memories, but she still realized that *something* was off. Mamori had interpreted this whole bodyguard business as a pretense for surveillance, but perhaps Kanoe really was sincerely worried. Did that "something" involve this combat force that surpassed Kanoe's hired guard? Or was it something that they could evade?

Running, Patricia crouched and set her hands down to brake. Black creatures skimmed over Shadow Gale's head, and her nurse cap flew into the air. She looked up; there were countless creatures flying at such a density that the sky was painted black. These were the things that had attacked Patricia's subordinates. With flapping rectangular wings, they were all focusing their aim on the two of them.

Patricia kicked the second creature that attacked, while the third, she backfisted, and the fourth, she grabbed by the ankle to swing around and smack into the fifth, sixth, and seventh. When the black shadows were struck by Patricia's attacks, they fell apart, seemingly disintegrating into nothingness.

Patricia muttered in irritation, "These are a new model of demon I've never seen before. Every single one of 'em is scary strong."

“They’re…strong?” asked Shadow Gale. “Because they don’t look it…”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha… Shadow, that’s just ’cause I’m stronger.”

Patricia dashed between high-rises as she dodged enemy attacks, wall-jumping to head diagonally upward, then whacking her upper arm into a demon’s throat on the way before kicking off the opposite wall for another diagonal ascent. She flipped forward to slam a kick down into a demon, moving between the walls of the two buildings while slaughtering further shadows until she reached the roof.

Patricia had voluntarily attacked the enemy, and the demons surged toward her from all around. Shadow Gale suppressed a scream as she clung to Patricia, who then grabbed the iron railing and easily pulled it up, concrete base and all.

However, not every single bar of the railing was encased in concrete; some were connected to the railings on either side. Yanking out one rail pulled off the bars to the right and left of it, and the bars to either side of those were yanked out, pulling the ones beside them, and in the end, the iron railing fluttered like a bamboo mat.

Patricia crouched low as she swung the railing around.

She struck the shadows with the twisted railing and lumps of concrete, smacking her enemies into the air and to the ground. Fragments of concrete rained down on Shadow Gale’s head as well, and she reflexively cringed.

By now, the swarm of flying demons had thinned out enough that you could get peeks of blue sky through the gaps. They kept their distance and didn’t approach.

“They’re smart,” Patricia muttered. She flung the iron railing at the swarm while she dropped into a gap between buildings, grabbing onto a window frame on the way down to kick through the window glass and burst into the building, race through an empty floor to smash the window on the opposite side, leap down and descend to a landing on her knees. Shadow Gale felt no shock of impact.

Patricia stood, then licked her fingertip and held it in the air. “The air’s…dry, huh?”

Shadow Gale looked up. A cold air stroked her cheeks. She’d assumed it was the windchill of being on Patricia’s back as she flew along, but even with that, it was too cold—practically freezing. The

air was dry and chilly.

"It's not just demons," said Patricia. "'Cause if it was, me and the girls would've been enough."

Patricia cut across a back alley and leaped out into a major artery. She took a sharp right at the intersection, leapfrogging over oncoming cars. As one suddenly braked behind her with a loud screech, she hopped over a cement wall and into a resident's yard; she crossed it to come outside again. Shadow Gale got a peek of a middle-aged woman through the window as they passed by; she never once looked away from the TV and didn't even notice Patricia.

Shadow Gale didn't make a sound as she clung to Patricia's back.

Tearing through a chain-link fence and running along the river, they came out through the culvert from the riverside to the street. From there, Patricia ran about ten steps before something suddenly struck her, and she promptly turned around. The impact almost knocked Shadow Gale off, but she somehow managed to grip onto Patricia and avoid falling, at least.

There was a magical girl—not the one in armor. She had a trident raised in her hands, and something that sparkled floated around her. She stared at Patricia and Shadow Gale, expressionless.

Patricia swung her weapon, and the enemy blocked it with her trident.

—A weapon?

It wasn't Patricia's. She'd had no choice but to abandon her own weapon in order to restrain the girl in armor. What she wielded now was a giant wrench, one of Shadow Gale's special items. After swinging it, Patricia pulled it back toward herself and to the right, and the enemy's trident followed, making the enemy pitch forward. Patricia had hooked the trident's handle.

The sound of clashing metal rang out. Patricia held a pair of oversize scissors in her left hand. This was, like the wrench, another one of Shadow Gale's special items. Whatever Patricia was doing, it was too fast for Shadow Gale to see. She'd probably swung the scissors at the enemy when she'd lost her balance. But why hadn't the strike connected? There was a shallow wound along her cheek, and that was all.

Another metallic clang. This time, Shadow Gale somehow managed to see it. Patricia swung the scissors, and the trajectory

had changed slightly, keeping it from connecting with the enemy directly, only skimming her.

That something that was floating around them became clear—it was blocking the scissors. The enemy reached toward the scissors and got a firm grip on Patricia's left hand, which had tossed the tool aside.

"Using ice to block, huh? You're pretty good," Patricia muttered, impressed. Her right arm trembled, the blood vessels in it rising. With the strength of just one arm, she jerked the wrench up from a lower position, the momentum sending it flying into the air. She acted as if the enemy hadn't even been holding her weapon down. Now both of them had one free hand.

"Then let's do it."

"Luxury Mode: On."

Shadow Gale was yelling, no longer able to suppress a scream. Frost had fallen on Patricia's left hand, which was grappling with the enemy, and it was starting to freeze. She was going white from her fingertips, and in the blink of an eye, the ice thickened.

Patricia didn't even look at her rapidly freezing left hand, instead clenching her right fist to thrust it upward. The enemy raised her arm to guard herself, and the impact reached Shadow Gale through Patricia's body. The enemy's once-expressionless face was now twisted. Patricia forced her to block another attack, and this time, the enemy was unsteady. She cried out in pain. The ice on Patricia's left arm had crawled up to her elbow. She had to have noticed it, but she didn't even so much as glance at it.

With the third strike, Shadow Gale could hear the sound of bones breaking. That was when the wrench and trident hit the roof of the house they stood on. With the third strike, Patricia's guard lowered and the enemy attacked. The lances of ice that were circling around them changed trajectory and attacked Patricia. They aimed for her neck and between the eyes, but she twisted around to evade one and take another in the shoulder. Just like with her grappling left hand, the ice took root, spreading outward from the shoulder it pierced.

But despite that, Patricia never stopped. There was nothing to stop her third punch, and she plunged it into the enemy's side. Even Shadow Gale could feel bones breaking. Not simply one—multiple. Blood spilled from the enemy's mouth. It wasn't merely a dribble like she'd cut her lip. She'd been injured internally.

Ice flew. But their aim was off. They whiffed by twelve inches from Patricia's face, not even skimming her. The enemy was clearly weakening. Patricia was gradually being covered in ice, but she still wasn't slowing down.

The moment it looked like Patricia would fire off her sixth punch, suddenly, she twisted around. Shadow Gale couldn't keep up with the sudden movement. Her arms released Patricia's neck as she was slammed hard against the house, knocking the wind out of her. Her eyes watered, distorting her vision.

"What did you…?" Shadow Gale murmured.

Ice pierced Patricia's brain stem and back.

Too late, Shadow Gale understood what had happened. Those last ice shots the enemy had thrown hadn't missed. They hadn't been aiming for Patricia—they had swerved to go for Shadow Gale on her back. Patricia had immediately shaken her off, and the arrows of ice had pierced her instead.

Patricia had taken that hit because she'd been protecting Shadow Gale.

A puff of air slipped from Patricia's lips. Eyes looking into empty space, she trembled slightly until, eventually, she stopped moving. The ice encased her whole body. Shadow Gale stood up, yelling, but faster than she could even clench a fist to punch, she was hit in the stomach and kicked in the jaw.

In the corner of her dimming vision, she saw the ice sculpture of Patricia fall.

◇ Uluru

Stepping out from the gates of the estate, she swiftly checked right and left. No one was there. It was early in the morning, so maybe that was why the enemy hadn't acted yet. Uluru paused a moment, then gave the signal to the two girls behind her that it was okay to come out.

The girls made up a mixed unit for the purpose of locating Premium Sachiko; Puk Puck's personal guard—Uluru and Sorami—and now the newest addition, Snow White. They would catch Premium Sachiko and bring her back to the estate before the ceremony was to be held. If the Osk Faction attacked, they would strike back without fail, showing how powerful and fearsome Puk

Puck was. They'd discipline the Osk Faction to ensure they would never defy her again.

That was Uluru's job as the leader of Puk Puck's entourage.

Just what did Premium Sachiko think she was doing? Puk Puck had taken her and Uluru and Sorami under her wing; they'd lived with her as long as they could remember. Uluru took obeying Puk Puck to be as natural as gravity itself. Running away from her was out of the question. Puk Puck had been the one to teach them about magic; Puk Puck had discovered their magical-girl potential; Puk Puck paid for their place to live, food, and everything else. Puk Puck had cared for them in all things.

Puk Puck was kind, cute, charming, and sweet. She had the abilities and character worthy of her position as an embodiment of one of the Three Sages, and she was beautiful, too. Plus, when push came to shove, she was more reliable than anyone.

And Sachiko had betrayed her expectations, running away right before the ceremony, of all things, and causing trouble for Puk Puck. Because Puk Puck was kind and calm and generous, she would surely forgive Sachiko. Any other master—for example, the other Sage incarnations—might not have ordered a search party for her. Instead, they'd probably have Sachiko eliminated, even if she was necessary for the ceremony to take place. Premium Sachiko had to be thankful. Having been with her for over ten years, Uluru had always thought Sachiko was lacking in gratitude.

Sachiko wasn't the only one who irritated Uluru. There was yet another: Snow White.

Uluru had heard she was known as the Magical-Girl Hunter, and that she was a strong fighter who used powerful mind-reading magic. She'd chase down her prey to the ends of the earth, her legs never slowing until her fangs had sunk into their throats. Uluru had also heard from Puk Puck that Snow White had defeated Grim Heart, an incarnation of one of the Three Sages, Chêne Osk Baal Mel. According to Puk Puck, Snow White had the combat skills to oppose any interference from the Osk Faction along with the investigative know-how to search for Premium Sachiko. As a result, Snow White was the optimum personnel for this mission to find Sachiko, take her into custody, and guard her on the way home. Uluru had accepted this because it was an order from Puk Puck, but deep within her was a raging storm with gale-force winds. Why did Puk Puck have to expressly look for assistance from an outsider?

Uluru couldn't just ask, *"Don't you trust us, Lady Puk Puck?"* So she held her tongue. But still, she wasn't satisfied.

Most of all, Uluru was irritated by Snow White's attitude. There was such a thing as too rude. Though she spoke with the minimum level of politeness, it was purely superficial, and Uluru couldn't sense any actual respect. Puk Puck had personally considered how to be hospitable to her. She'd worried over so many things, like "Do kids these days not eat traditional sweets much?" "We have Western-style rooms, but I guess serving her cake and black tea in the nicest suite available wouldn't seem quite right, huh?" "What d'you think of the combination of cola and potato chips? A bit too American, maybe?" "I wonder; I get the feeling that someone, somewhere, served Snow White that combination and messed things up, but I also feel like we can make it succeed this time, for sure. Hey, what do you think, Uluru?" But Snow White had never even touched the menu, insisting on discussing work only.

Uluru couldn't butt in when Puk Puck wasn't complaining. She'd been told that was "presumptuous." But even knowing that, she wanted to chew out Snow White, just once. The one thing that was clear here was that this rude magical girl viewed the great Puk Puck with contempt.

After being introduced to one another, they had all had a meeting about capturing Premium Sachiko, and then they'd left the estate and closed the gates. Now, finally, Puk Puck was no longer watching. If Puk Puck wasn't there, then it wouldn't be presumptuous for Uluru to tell off Snow White.

Uluru glanced over at Sorami beside her. She was zoning out, staring at her magical phone. That was fine. They'd known each other for more than a decade; Uluru knew awfully well that she was not particularly reliable.

Uluru had heard Snow White was a dangerous magical girl. Just a little talking-to might result in bloodshed. But Uluru swore that even if that did happen, she'd never do anything to bring shame to her mistress. So putting her right hand to the gun on her back, she spoke from the gut. "Line up!"

Snow White shot Uluru a confused look, while Sorami looked at Uluru the way you would when you found a bunch of cockroaches in the kitchen at night. "Sis, we're really gonna do that now?"

"Of course we are. This is an important job we're about to do, isn't it?"

“Yeah, yeah… Sorry, Snow, could you come stand over here for a minute?”

Sorami and Snow White went to stand together with the gates of the estate behind them. The leader, Uluru, stood facing the two of them and took muster. “Roll call!”

“Ooone.”

“…Two.”

“Three, pon.”

Uluru was startled by the electronic voice but then remembered: *Oh yeah, that’s Snow White’s mascot, the digital fairy*. She really didn’t like its little sentence-ending quirk, or the apathetic responses from the other girls that lacked any sort of uniformity. That said, if she were to make them redo it, Sorami would respond with even less enthusiasm, so Uluru decided to leave it.

“Before we depart, there’s a little something I’d like to ask.” Snow White raised her right hand.

“Yeaaah?” Sorami replied. Her eyes were still glued to her magical phone, not even trying to hide her apathy. Uluru thought it was kind of rude to answer while using your phone, no matter how insulting the person you were addressing might be. Snow White didn’t seem in the least bothered as she continued.

“My magic lets me hear the thoughts of people in trouble.”

“So it seems,” said Sorami.

“And earlier, inside, I heard both of yours.”

“For real? That’s embarrassing.”

“And I heard Puk Puck’s, too.”

Suddenly, Uluru’s mind flashed red. “Out of line!”

Sorami raised her head, and Snow White turned to face Uluru, too.

“That’s out of line and over the line! Completely out! You can’t read the minds of important people! And of all the important people whose minds you could read, to read Lady Puk Puck’s… That’s absolutely, clearly out of line!” Uluru flipped out. She tried to grab Snow White by the lapels, but Snow White smoothly dodged her, which only fanned the flames of Uluru’s anger. She clenched her fist to give her a punch only to feel a tug on her sleeve. It was Sorami.

“Sis, you’re yelling too loud.”

“It’s out of line! Out of line! Insubordinate!”

“But you’re causing a scene. Look.” Sorami was glancing over at

two elementary school kids who seemed to be on their way to school. The moment they were seen, they immediately averted their eyes and started striding away briskly. They made empty conversation as if trying to hide something: “I don’t wanna do the school marathon the day after tomorrow.” “Yeah, I hate sports events, but practice sucks, too, huh?”

“This is a top secret mission, right? So it’d be dangerous if we attracted any attention.”

“Urk…”

Snow White put on a pale-brown peacoat. Sorami gathered her overly flashy hair and tied it up, tucking the stuffed animals and other decorations into a backpack. Since Uluru’s costume was more subdued to begin with, she hadn’t come up with any particular plan to hide it, but she did tuck her gun and tail under her coat, at least. They were all being cautious about their costumes because this was that sort of job—a “secret mission.”

“And also,” Sorami added, “like, if we’re all yelling and making a fuss in front of the estate, we might get a weird reputation. And that wouldn’t be good for Lady Puk, right?”

Uluru quietly cleared her throat and lowered her voice. “Um. Here isn’t good. As leader, Uluru thinks we should go elsewhere.”

“Then let’s do it.”

This wasn’t the place to scold someone. Uluru didn’t want to consider causing trouble for, disappointing, or saddening Puk Puck. She would live up to Puk Puck’s expectations. In fact, she would make efforts even beyond what was expected of her. That was the mission laid upon those magical girls who served one of the Three Sages. Being in a high position demanded the appropriate skills and achievements.

Leading the other two, Uluru briskly hurried ahead. Snow White and Sorami walked side by side, chattering idly with each other.

“So, like, your magic activates on auto, right?” asked Sorami.

“That’s right.”

“So then it’s not about being rude at all, right? Since you just hear stuff whenever you’re transformed.”

“I appreciate that.”

“And yeah, that seems so convenient. I wish I could do that. It’d be great to be able to hear people’s thoughts like that.”

“It’s really not.”

“Like when you go over to someone’s place, y’know like you came to us, and they say to you like, ‘So we want you to do this job for us,’ you don’t know if you can trust the person asking, right? So you can just turn down a job if they’re someone you can’t trust.”

“That’s right.”

“Oh, so wait—since you accepted this job, that means you think Lady Puk is an employer worth trusting, right?”

“Yes. Since she was sincerely concerned for Sachiko, as well as for all of you.”

Uluru sniffed. *Of course she is*, thought Uluru. Puk Puck had a big heart and would forgive any wrongdoing. She was even kind toward a runaway like Sachiko.

“I did hear Puk—Lady Puk Puck’s thoughts, and also Uluru’s from behind the screen door.”

“Ooh, you did, huh?” said Sorami.

“I heard how she was sincerely worried about Premium Sachiko. So I understood that you’re not trying to deceive me.”

No longer able to put up with such unpleasant conversation, Uluru stopped and turned around. She stuck out her finger at Sorami. “Leader’s order: no pointless chatter.” Next, she turned back to Snow White. “Listen. Uluru isn’t worried about Premium Sachiko. She’s just an ingrate who kicked sand all over Lady Puk Puck’s kindness. She really should be getting boiled or sawed to death or being made to drink poison hemlock, but Lady Puk Puck has very generously forgiven her.”

Sorami folded her hands behind her head, the corners of her lips curling up. “She can hear your thoughts, y’know? What’s the point of putting on that act?”

“How am I putting on an act?!”

“You’re actually worried about Sachiko, aren’t you?”

“If she’s said Uluru’s worried, then that has to be true,” replied Uluru.

“See, I knew it.”

“Because Uluru is under orders from Lady Puk Puck. She took Uluru’s hand and said, ‘You three sisters always stay close,’ so Uluru is worried about keeping that promise.”

“Ahh, uh-huh. So that’s how you’re playing it.”

“What do you mean, ‘playing it’? Anyway, no more pointless chatter,” Uluru said, and then she turned to face front again and resumed brisk strides.

Snow White and Sorami were silent for a while, but eventually, they started whispering to each other. Uluru had never said to them that they could talk as long as she didn’t hear it, but still, if she was to stop over every little thing, who knew how many years it’d take them to find Sachiko? Irritation mounting, Uluru strode onward.

◇ Sorami Nakano

If any permanent residents of Puk Puck’s estate were to leave the city without permission, it would set off an alert at the estate. Sorami didn’t like this since it made her feel like she was being watched, but it seemed this was part of the package when you served an incarnation of one of the Three Sages. The alert had not sounded, so that meant Sachiko was still in W City.

W City was known as a quiet residential neighborhood, and the average income of its citizens was quite a bit higher than

neighboring towns and villages. While other towns here and there were doing mergers, the mayor and residents here had been stubbornly turning away from any of that, saying there was no merit in it for them, that public safety was good, and they were making enough tax revenue. That meant the town didn't cover a lot of land. It didn't make a huge difference, but it did make it somewhat easier to look for people.

When Sorami thought of Sachiko, the first thing that came to mind was her tendency to cry.

It was very like Sachiko to crumble under pressure and run away from home—but no one had thought she'd do that right before the ceremony. Only Sorami had had the vague sense that maybe Sachiko would run away, though she hadn't said it out loud. She'd felt sorry for Sachiko, being under such heavy pressure and entrusted with this ceremony. Sachiko had been white as a sheet and looked shaky.

Just who was it that had put those papers up all over the estate? LET'S ALL WORK TOGETHER AND DO OUR BEST ON THE CEREMONY, WE'RE GOING TO MAKE THIS A SUCCESS, THIS IS A MOBILIZATION OF THE PUK FACTION'S POWER! It was only natural that hanging stuff like that everywhere would make Sachiko feel pressured.

Whatever Sachiko did, she always looked pitiful. You couldn't help but sympathize with her.

She'd basically always gotten through things by hiding in the shadows of others. When training, she'd always be the first to give up. Then Uluru would get mad at her, and Puk Puck would mediate, and Sorami would back her up. Whenever they marathoned films together and the DVD switched to a horror movie, Sachiko would get flustered and run to her room. Even if the others tried to coax her out, she wouldn't answer.

This might be said to be the first big moment in Sachiko's life, her first time as the star of the show. There was no way she could overcome that sort of pressure. Sorami saw it as inevitable she would run away from it all. Uluru and Puck were both a little off. Or rather, they could be ignorant to the delicacies of the heart, detached from mundane manners like these. They must not have ever even considered that the key figure who had been entrusted with such an important role would run away.

Honestly, Sorami wanted to let her get away for a while, until things cooled down. The problem was that Sachiko was being

targeted by a violent crowd who wanted to overturn, by force, what had been decided in conference. Sachiko had probably run away because she was scared, and she hadn't even considered that anyone was after her. Sorami really did feel bad.

Sachiko wasn't the only one to feel bad for—there was also Uluru.

If you just saw her strutting ahead briskly, she would look self-assured. She had to think of herself that way. Sorami knew, though, that she was not, in fact, anything like self-assured.

A meow from a cat walking on top of a cement-block wall would make Uluru freak out and point her gun at it, which would startle the cat and make it jump, and the noise the cat made would startle Uluru, too, making her jump. Pulling the trigger on Uluru's gun would just pop out a flag, and a cork stopper on a string would fly out—it was a toy. She mainly used it as a blunt weapon. But even so, she always carried it with care, never letting it out of her grasp.

With their positions as protégés of a Sage incarnation, there weren't really any opportunities for real combat in the first place. Even though they did train every day, in case something happened, Sorami didn't want to be smack-smacking anyone with punches, and she wanted to be the one getting whack-whacked with punches even less.

So that would mean Snow White, the Magical-Girl Hunter who was highly experienced in real combat, would act as leader, but this personnel selection was incompatible with Uluru's pride. Uluru believed that as someone who served a Sage incarnation, she had to be better than Snow White, the outsider. Even if one cat was enough to freak her out, she wasn't going to leave her position as the leader and giver of orders.

If Sorami was to advise her, "*I think things would go better if you were more relaxed*," Uluru would reply, "*You're only trying to justify your own blatant slacking.*"

Lowering her voice quiet enough that Uluru, walking ahead of them, wouldn't be able to hear, Sorami poked Snow White in the arm and said, "So what d'you think we should do? Me and Uluru have literally no real combat experience. It'd be real bad if we panicked and, like, something happened that we couldn't take back, y'know?"

"Should Fal and I think of something? Then we can make it

sound like it was your suggestion."

"I like the sound of that. Yeah, let's do it."

"So then we need a situation where we can talk about it naturally, pon?"

"Yeah," said Sorami. "I think maybe it'd be better if she was a little more relaxed, too."

Fal had deliberately added, "naturally," so Sorami should assume that was an abridged statement that left out, "*Since if we were to just talk to her normally, she'd be entirely inapproachable.*" In her heart, Sorami apologized for her big sister being like this. Since this was Snow White, she should be able to hear even her mental apologies.

"So then how about something like this," said Sorami. "First, Snow, you…" First, Snow White would pick up on the thoughts of passersby and tell Sorami if any of them were in trouble. Sorami would pass that on to Uluru, and the three of them would help that person.

Snow White tugged lightly on her sleeve. When Sorami looked where she was pointing, she saw a man who looked like a university student standing in front of a bicycle by the roadside.

"Sis," said Sorami, "it looks like that guy's in trouble. He's forgotten the password on his smartphone lock."

"So what?" said Uluru.

"We're not gonna help? With my magic, I can find out the number."

"We don't have the time for that."

"Come on, you don't have to be so grumpy. It's not like we don't have a few spare minutes. Besides, remember what Lady Puk said: 'Being kind to people in trouble is what magical girls are all about.'" Bringing up something Puk Puck had said would make Uluru go along with this, no matter what.

After telling the guy his password, the three of them helped people here and there as they made their way along. They carried an old woman's things while she crossed the street and righted a fallen trash can and picked up all the garbage. Distracting Uluru like this would calm her down a little, and the sense that the three of them were working in cooperation would make her relax around Snow White.

Sneakily, so Uluru wouldn't see, Sorami gave Snow White a thumbs-up, and Snow White responded with the same. She was

surprisingly good at playing along.

◇ **Uluru**

They decided to use the train to get around. Only an amateur or a meathead would think that magical girls should just run everywhere. It'd be a big problem for someone to see a girl running faster than cars at ten in the morning. And being a magical girl in service of a Sage, Uluru couldn't cause any big problems. She would stick to the rules.

When Uluru explained this, Sorami replied, "Yeah, yeah," with her usual reluctant look, while Snow White, who Uluru had thought might be against this because it was a hassle, nodded with surprising obedience.

They bought three tickets, got receipts for them, and boarded the train.

At this time of the day, this train line wasn't crowded. Once the three of them sat down in a row with Sorami in the middle, Snow White and Sorami started a whispered conversation. The shrill, childlike voice that occasionally joined in was Snow White's mascot. Uluru didn't know what they were talking about.

Not that I really have to know anyway, Uluru thought as she turned her gaze to outside the window. The scenery flowed by. The buildings moved from right to left, and in the distance, she could see Mount Shouki. Puk Puck had taken them there before. Sorami, Uluru, Sachiko, and Puk Puck had gone together on a picnic. The sandwiches Sachiko had made had gotten crushed flat, leaving her on the verge of tears. "You're hopeless," Uluru had said, switching her own with Sachiko's, instantly bringing a smile to Sachiko's face. They'd all laughed about it after, saying, "Oh, she's so manipulative."

Sachiko hadn't changed since they were kids. She was a weakling, a crybaby, and a coward. In mock battles, just a bit of a hard hit would make her burst into tears, and if you gave her even mildly challenging homework, she'd give up. Uluru remembered how Puk Puck had spent so much time adjusting the difficulty level for her. Sachiko was supposed to have promised to save up a little bit of money out of her allowance each month for future use. But oftentimes, she didn't even save enough for that tiny bit, and every

time, Uluru would give her a loan, saying, “You really need to stop this.”

Incidentally, her magic wasn’t useful, either. If she used her magic to “use up a lifetime’s worth of luck all at once” on someone, it promised an absolute success at something one time, but Uluru didn’t even want to remember what had happened to those who had used up a whole lifetime’s worth of luck. They had died in brutal ways, like a meteor falling on their heads or an out-of-control truck crashing into a library, as if the world were ordering them to die.

You also couldn’t simply catch some random person and force them to use up their luck. In order to use Sachiko’s magic, the subject had to circle “yes” on each item on one of the contracts attached to Sachiko’s costume and then sign their full name—not the sort of thing you could do in the middle of battle. And even in noncombat situations, someone who was hostile to you wouldn’t do it. Wondering if it could be helpful for something, Uluru had sneakily borrowed one of the contracts, looked over all the items listed, and pondered it over, but there was no way that magic could serve a real purpose.

To put a fine point on things, Sachiko was downright useless in every single aspect: personality, physical ability, magic. But Puk Puck had supported her anyway. She spoke kindly to her, took her on outings, gave her an allowance every month, and patted her head whenever she did something good. Even Uluru gave her guidance, never abandoning her. She didn’t really know about Sorami, but it seemed she sometimes shared snacks with Sachiko.

But Sachiko had ignored and tossed aside all such debts of gratitude and ran away from Puk Puck. It wasn’t like this sort of thing had never happened before, though; one time, Sachiko dropped a bonsai pot and broke it, then swiftly ran away from home before anyone could find out. However, she was apprehended almost immediately and wound up getting scolded more harshly than was necessary.

But now was far, far worse. Uluru could imagine why Sachiko had run away.

The time had come when useless Sachiko could finally be useful. Since Puk Puck was so kind, maybe she’d come up with a way for Sachiko to be successful so she wouldn’t have to feel anxious about her general poor performance. Still, Sachiko had

crumbled under the pressure and run off yet again. The word "ceremony" did make it sound scary, but it wasn't as if they were performing some kind of sacrifice. Plus, Puk Puck had guaranteed nobody was going to die. So what reason was there to be afraid?

The Osk Faction had somehow learned of Sachiko's disappearance and were tailing her because she was necessary for Puk Puck's ceremony.

Uluru's head hurt. She felt ready to sigh. But she was the eldest. It was the eldest sister's duty to look after her little sisters. Puk Puck had told her many times, too: "Take care of the both of them, 'cause you're the big sister."

No matter how hard things got, a big sister wasn't allowed to run away. A big sister had to endure.

◇ Sorami Nakano

On the train, Snow White explained to them the gist of how her magic worked. Her mascot Fal's abilities were so wide-ranging, it was difficult to explain in a short period of time, so Sorami got to learn about it with her magic.

Sorami's magic was to know what was in something without opening it up. Using her powers, she could also learn about the abilities of a mascot character that lived inside an administrator's magical phone.

"I'm tiiired," Sorami whined.

"What?" said Uluru.

"Let's take a little breeeak. We helped so many people, I'm pooped."

"Honestly, Sorami… Okay, five minutes, no more."

The three of them sat down in a row on a station bench. Sorami took on an interpreter-like role by speaking to Snow White and Fal on the right and Uluru on the left, enabling them all to converse even if one party wasn't directly speaking with one another. "Oh yeah, so this idea just hit me. Using your magic, Uluru…," Sorami said, bringing up the proposal from Snow White as if it was her own.

Sorami thought Snow White came up with pretty good ideas, even when it came to other people's magic. Snow White was pretty impressive—not that Sorami could say that to Uluru.

This was a digital fairy that had been modified by a magical girl who had been so powerful she'd even made the Magical Kingdom throw up their hands and do nothing—plus its master. Sorami could understand why Puk Puck had expressly called her there. She could also understand well how Snow White had outwitted Grim Heart. Though Uluru still might not believe that.

Uluru was stubborn, contrary, prideful, and rigid. She would calmly make declarations like "*Have some pride as a magical girl in service of Puk Puck!*" or "*Conduct yourself in a way that won't bring shame!*" Sorami would be too embarrassed to say anything so old-fashioned.

Sorami knew Uluru wasn't a bad person—she was just stubborn. She would bark orders like "*Make sure you're thoroughly prepared*," while she was the one most looking forward to an outing and rolling around all night unable to sleep. That time they'd gone out for dinner at a fancy restaurant, she'd said, "People tend to let their guard down when eating. Those are the times you ought to stay sharp," while she herself had been skipping a little on the way to the restaurant.

And she was stubborn when it came to Sachiko, too. Uluru said she looked out for her only because Puk Puck had told her to get along with her sisters, but Sorami knew that this time, Uluru was genuinely worried. When Snow White had come, she'd been grumbling anxiously, "Lady Puk Puck isn't going to give up on Sachiko, right?" And even just now, while she'd been arrogantly telling Snow White she was only worried because she'd been ordered to get along with her sisters, she'd been blushing. She hadn't gotten shamed for it because Snow White was socially perceptive and Sorami was used to Uluru, and they hadn't pointed it out.

In the end, it would be the same as always. Sorami would be helping her out. Though that fundamentally should have been the job of the second eldest or the eldest, the eldest was too aggressive, and the second eldest was too timid.

Even if not knowing about Snow White's magic or Fal's abilities would put Uluru in trouble, her stubbornness prevented her from asking them about it. Similarly, it was Uluru's obstinance that kept her from telling Snow White and Fal about her own magic even if not doing so would cause problems.

Sorami also talked about what Sachiko looked like in human

form. Staying as a magical girl had its benefits and drawbacks. Running fast and not needing to eat or drink were great perks, but magical girls also looked overly garish and tended to stand out, making it difficult to get lost in crowds and stay hidden. Snow White predicted there was an 80 percent chance Sachiko was fleeing in her magical-girl form. If there was still a 20 percent chance she was running in human form, then it was worth considering.

Sorami always served as coordinator between Uluru and Sachiko, but she wasn't really sick of the role itself. She'd gotten used to it, and she was also glad to be getting along rather than fighting. It was tedious when Sachiko cried. So was Uluru being angry. Sorami didn't need Puk Puck telling her to get along to think this way.

Departing the train, they headed to a capsule hotel. The three sisters had taken turns sleeping here once back when Puk Puck had gone to eat with some important person at a nearby hotel.

Sorami indirectly communicated to Uluru and Snow White information such as Fal's ability to detect magical girls within two hundred yards, the range Snow White's magic could reach, and how Sachiko should still be within the city limits since Puk Puck would be able to tell if she tried to leave.

After the capsule hotel, they covered the shopping district, the supermarket, and the department store. Next, they slipped by a local diner while keeping an eye out for magical-girl pings, then passed in front of the big bookstore, the shopping mall, and the electronics district, making their way along. Snow White listened for voices, Fal probed with his radar, and Sorami would touch buildings to learn their contents, reporting with each one that Sachiko wasn't in there that day.

Sorami spoke to Snow White fairly often, expressing surprise at the functionality of a new model of some consumer electronic, bringing up a new volume of manga that was just out to sound out her tastes, talking about incidents that had happened where they were—telling stories of Uluru helping out Sachiko when she messed up, like for example, that time she had nearly knocked down the eggs piled up at the supermarket and Uluru had swiftly stacked them up again and saved her, stories like that—talking to her, she didn't forget to emphasize that Uluru wasn't really a bad person.

Leaving the municipal park, Sorami stopped there to say

emphatically, “I’m tiiired. I wanna take a breeeeak!” in the laziest tone she could muster. Uluru would give her what she wanted that way.

“What are you talking about, Sorami?” said Uluru. “We just took a break at the train station.”

“But like, if you’re gonna be efficient with something like this, you need lots of breaks. I mean, if you walk nonstop without ever resting, it actually makes it inefficient instead, right? Look, there’s *obanyaki* right over there! I’m gonna go buy some, so wait on that bench for me, okay?” Being pretty forceful about getting her way, Sorami went to buy three *obanyaki*, then decided to take a break.

Magical girls don’t need to eat or drink, nor do they get tired easily. They have no need for breaks—that was how the Uluru type operated. The Sorami type considered taking breaks and making time for chitchat vital in order to build good relationships. Plus, having a little something to nibble on only facilitated things, so it was best to have something good to eat.

When Sorami returned to the bench with piping-hot stuffed pancake-like treats in her hands, an electronic voice rang out, preventing Uluru from starting up with the lecture that was about to come out then.

“Three magical girls detected in total, approaching slowly from the east gate. Their speed is about the same as a human walking… They’ve started running and they’re coming close, pon!”

If there were three of them, then it wasn’t Sachiko, especially if these three were running toward them.

Sorami surveyed the area. On the right hand of the brick-paved intersection, about sixty-five feet back, was the *obanyaki* stall. There were four people around it but none over here. It was impossible to avoid being seen, but they had to avoid involving those people in a fight, at least.

Ahead of the billowing cloud of dust, Sorami saw the magical girls running toward them. The three of them were stripping off coats as they ran. Snow White struck the brick with the heel of her shoe. Her mascot character went “Huh?” in its synthetic voice. The three magical girls looked startlingly similar. They were costumed like card soldiers, and the only thing different about them were the pictures on the cards: a jack of spades, a queen of spades, and a king of spades.

With spade-shaped spears raised and faces blank, the card

soldiers charged, their strength apparent even at a glance.

◇ Fal

Fal was confused. Card-themed magical girls—Shufflins, without a doubt. He had watched Snow White and some other magical girls fight plenty of them back in the underground laboratory. However, the records said Joker, the leader, died in an accident afterward.

Fal wasn't so naive that he would foolishly take such reports at face value. He knew the upper ranks had their way of "dealing with" things. Some people deemed too inconvenient to be left alive were made out to have died in an accident, something that wasn't at all unusual.

But if that was what had happened, then this was strange. The Three Sages cared about appearances. It would be out of the question for a magical girl who had been made out to have died in an accident to show her face in public. If a magical girl who should have died in an accident attacked a magical girl from an opposing faction in a public park in broad daylight where anyone could be watching, that would really put them in a tight situation.

Before Fal's confusion could settle, the magical girls took action.

Sorami spread her palms, readying them in front and behind. Snow White stripped off her coat and raised Ruler. Uluru drew a gun from behind her back, and right before the enemy could make contact, she yelled, "Get down and close your eyes! Otherwise, you'll die!"

Fal was startled. He wasn't equipped with the functionality to get down or close his eyes. Keek, who had modified Fal, had been emotional when it came to magical girls, but she'd been extremely pragmatic when it came to mascot characters. She'd modified Fal heavily many times, but she'd never given him any humanlike functionality.

And those choices Keek had made meant Fal would die here. He could not get down on the ground or close his eyes. And since he couldn't, he was going to die.

He was hit with despair, which immediately turned to regret. Sadness and frustration seeped into him before fear reared its ugly head. He'd been in dire situations where he thought he might die

many times before. But he'd never thought about what would happen once he died. His imagination had never gone in that direction. As for whether there was a heaven or hell, he doubted such a thing existed, and even if it did, it seemed unlikely either would open their gates to a mascot created through magic and technology. If he died, would he just return to nothingness? He wouldn't be able to help Snow White anymore. Would she be okay on her own?

The three Shufflins dived headfirst onto the ground. Snow White and Sorami threw themselves to the ground, too, but then quickly stood up again.

Snow White was so calm, it was as if she couldn't even hear what Uluru had said. She took the rope Sorami had tossed her, then tied up the arms and legs of one of the Shufflins on the ground, and Sorami and Uluru joined in. The Shufflins were still on their stomachs with their eyes closed. There was no sign at all that Snow White, Uluru, or Sorami were going to die.

Then Fal remembered. There was no reason they would die if they didn't get on the ground and close their eyes.

"What do we do with these guys?" said Sorami.

"We can't just leave them here," agreed Uluru.

"I'll take them into safekeeping for now." Snow White opened up the four-dimensional bag hanging from her waist and tossed in the tied and struggling Shufflins one after another.

◇ **Snow White**

When stuffing the three Shufflins into the bag, Snow White secretly retied the ropes so as to avoid criticism from Uluru. You had to tie magical girls in such a way that would keep them tightly bound and prevent them from moving, or it was going to come undone even if it was magic rope. If she did this, they wouldn't get away.

Sorami patted Uluru on the back. "Nice work, sis!"

Uluru puffed out her chest. "Your plans go well, sometimes."

Watching them, Snow White smiled to herself. Uluru was blushing, and her hands holding the gun were trembling slightly. She must have been nervous. But despite that, she hadn't made any mistakes, making proper use of her magic to bring the situation under control bloodlessly against the three powerful spade face

cards.

It was a convenient ability, one that was also compatible with Snow White's magic.

Uluru's power to "make people believe her lies" had caused the Shufflins to believe her claim that "If you don't get down and cover your eyes, you'll die." They'd thrown themselves down on the spot and closed their eyes. With the card soldiers left helpless, Snow White, Uluru, and Sorami had tied them up. Uluru's magic immediately came undone once the victim realized she was lying, as it did with Snow White, who had heard Uluru think, *I'll be in trouble if they find out that's a lie.* It had also quickly come undone for Sorami, who knew how Uluru's magic worked. Fal, meanwhile, had listened to an explanation of her magic earlier and remained confused for only a little while. Only the three Shufflins, who had not known of Uluru's magic, continued to be caught up in it. Inside Snow White's bag, they were still prostrate with their eyes closed.

Snow White picked up the coat she'd tossed away, and while putting it on, she said to Uluru, "We have to save those people."

"I was literally just about to do that."

Everyone within range of Uluru's voice—the staff and customers at the *obanyaki* stand, unlucky passersby, the salaryman skipping work for a bit to have a rest in the park, the old man feeding the pigeons—all of them were on the ground with their eyes closed. Only the pigeons were pecking at their food, heedless.

"That was a lie, okay? You'll be fine even if you're not on the ground or have your eyes closed!" Uluru called out to them all, then immediately started walking off. Snow White and Sorami followed after her.

Lowering his voice to a murmur that sank into a whisper, Fal said, "What were those Shufflins, pon?"

Snow White replied at a similar volume, "It's a different unit."

"A different unit?"

"Different from the one we fought in the underground laboratory, at least in terms of appearance and power. Like they each have an extra ribbon on their boots, and their physical strength and endurance are slightly improved. The biggest difference is that there's no Joker."

"No Joker?"

"I heard them thinking that if they all die, it's over. There's no Joker, so they can't be revived."

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

To describe the Osk Faction most succinctly, the best term would be "non-monolothic." Just as a single world included a multitude of dimensions or a star system contained countless stars, just as nations innumerable crowd one planet, each of the three great factions of the Magical Kingdom were made up of forces of varying sizes.

The Osk Faction did not appoint locally hired magical girls to important posts; it would either make them pawns or material for experiments. Either way, they were generally used up and tossed aside. While it didn't happen super often, it was a fact that there were mages in the upper ranks who did not balk at that sort of inhumane treatment.

For that reason, there were very rarely any magical girls who would choose to throw their lot in with the Osk Faction. But there were still a few. CQ Angel Hamuel was ambitious, and she figured fewer magical girls meant more opportunities for her. She was also confident enough to think that if she conducted herself so as not to be used up and thrown away, she'd be perfectly fine.

"Ooh, here they come! Confirmed from above. Three targets. Appearance is as described earlier. Yes, Snow White is the one who killed your sister model, but don't bother with that. Nothing good will come of it, typically." Hamuel was communicating via her magic wireless radio. With this device, she could communicate directly into the mind of anyone she had met before, no matter where she was—and, conveniently, the device also automatically translated into a language the person could understand. The recipients of her communications now were all the Shufflin IIs under Hamuel's command.

Upon receiving instructions from Hamuel, aside from the three spade face cards who had recently been captured, a total of forty-nine Shufflin IIs moved into action. Shufflin II was an improved version, customized to fit her commander, with slight alterations to her abilities and appearance. The Shufflin II models under Hamuel's command lacked a Joker, which boosted each individual unit's capabilities accordingly.

Most would argue that the greatest feature of the Shufflin series was the Joker. No matter how much damage they took, you could restore your forces just by taking one magical girl as prisoner. This

would force your opponent to fight a painful battle in which they couldn't allow even a single person to be captured.

Hamuel thought differently. That may have been a viable idea if the powers of the Shufflin series had been kept completely under wraps. But Grim Heart had made a blunder of things, and the Shufflins' abilities had been leaked to various parties, so that wouldn't work anymore. If the enemy knew they'd be used as a sacrifice and executed if caught, they'd never, ever surrender. They would muster their most desperate efforts of resistance until the very end.

Soldiers who were prepared to die were frightening, much more so if those soldiers were magical girls. If a magical girl was determined to defeat the enemy, even if it meant sacrificing the most valuable thing of all—her own life—that clearly meant she was deeply moved. And sometimes, if a magical girl's heart was deeply moved, it would make her magic grow. Her desperation would not simply be a desperate final struggle.

"Diamond unit, continue monitoring from close range. Clubs and spades, continue movement, avoiding a 550-yard radius around the position where the digital fairy was detected—that way we can respond to sudden movements. Magical girls are always dashing off suddenly, after all."

Hamuel had underestimated the capabilities of the digital fairy's radar. Its search radius was wider than she had thought, leading the three spade face cards that she'd assigned as the diamonds' guards to enter the search radius just because they'd been sticking out of formation a little. And since they'd been discovered, figuring she had no choice, Hamuel had ordered them to gauge the enemy's strength, and if possible, capture them—but the Shufflins had been easily captured instead.

Hamuel would not let an unexpected accident end as such. If she'd lost three of her elite spades, then she had to turn that into something positive.

In their clash in the park, she'd learned the radius of the digital fairy's search function as well as how the girl with the gun's magic worked—probably something like making people believe what she said. Seeing how all the humans around had been throwing themselves on the ground as well, it had to affect everyone who heard it. The pigeons strutting about the park, however, hadn't seemed to react. They'd been frightened by the humans suddenly

throwing themselves down, but when it seemed clear they wouldn't move anymore, they'd gone to pecking at the popcorn spilled on the ground. Hamuel could assume that the magic was ineffective on beings that didn't understand human language. Giving the Shufflin IIs under her command linguistic ability to help with the investigation had backfired.

In exchange, Hamuel had informed them there was no Joker. Snow White would know of its absence. She wouldn't think she'd been "informed" of that, and her mind-reading ability had been a part of Hamuel's calculations. Even bearing in mind the capture of the three spade face cards, the trade was still advantageous to Hamuel.

There had been an accident, but many positives had come out of it. That was fine; learning about the enemy was worth more than three elite units.

Hamuel would have the enemy search for Premium Sachiko, and then she would tighten the circle around them. Then a Shufflin unit spearheaded by the Ace of Spades, an immensely powerful fighter, would attack. If possible, Hamuel would have the enemy surrender before any damages occurred. Since there was no Joker, the Shufflins would not be revived.

The lack of a Joker made the Shufflin II more like a homunculus, but nonetheless, she was still Hamuel's dear subordinate. The fewer injuries, the better.

Surely the enemy thought the same. If both parties sought to reduce damage, then maybe they could compromise somewhere, make room for negotiation. Hamuel's magic was suited not only to command and translation, but also to negotiation and prompting surrender.

She also had information that there were other magical girls active within the city. Who knew when they might interfere? It was better to be rough and ready than slow and deliberate. She would end things as quickly as she could.

"The hearts will act as my escort—after all, I'm far weaker compared with you guys. But look, you'd be in trouble if your commander were defeated, right? Actually, I'd look really bad if you said you wouldn't."

Below, the three magical girls were going through the park toward the station. At times like this, the ability to fly was extremely convenient. When Hamuel was ordering her forces

surrounding her targets to move, she happened to look over and see two boys of about elementary school–age playing catch on the sidewalk outside the park—playing catch inside the park probably wasn't allowed. But still, there were quite a few cars going by, so it was a bit dangerous.

Hamuel brought her mouth close to her wireless radio. "You're not allowed to play catch on the sidewalk. If this continues any further, I'm contacting your school," she told them.

The two boys seemed rattled, looking this way and that for the source of the voice. But they couldn't find anyone who could have spoken, and that seemed to get them even more worked up. Hamuel's magic reached people's minds directly. Distance was no object; her target could be at the opposite end of the earth and still her magic would take effect.

The boys fell over themselves running away. Maybe this would become some sort of new ghost story. Slowly, Hamuel descended toward the group of heart Shufflins.

INTERLUDE

It was an unfamiliar room. It looked like some warehouse. There were no windows. She couldn't tell if it was day or night. It was entirely barren, with just concrete walls and a concrete floor. The room was square, with all sides about the same length—four and a half steps, given Shadow Gale's stride.

Her wrench, scissors, magical phone, even her bandages had been confiscated. All she had on her person was her costume. She needed nothing more than her bare fists to break concrete. Shadow Gale wasn't that strong, but even she could pull off that much. The problem was her guards.

Eerie black creatures were stationed in the four corners of the room, each hovering using two winglike square shapes on their backs. Whenever Shadow Gale moved, the four of them moved with her. Lifting the parts of them that corresponded to human faces, they always faced Shadow Gale, as if to tell her that they would attack instantly should she run.

Enough of these demon-like creatures had appeared to cover the whole sky, and Patricia's subordinates had gone to fight them off. That crew had wound up unable to respond to Patricia's call. And now there were four of those creatures here.

Aside from responding to Shadow Gale's movements, they did nothing at all. No matter if she tried asking them where this was or if Patricia was okay, they didn't react.

Shadow Gale wondered if Patricia was locked up somewhere, then bit her lip. She recalled the last time she'd seen Patricia; it was unlikely she was still alive. She'd been stabbed with a spear of ice in order to protect Shadow Gale, and her whole body had been frozen solid.

Shadow Gale jumped off the concrete floor, and the four black silhouettes all stood at once. When she showed them by raising her hands up to her head that she wasn't going to try anything, they

quietly sat down again.

Patricia had been killed, but Shadow Gale had not. She could assume the enemy's goal had been to capture her. Perhaps that attack Patricia had protected her from had been done with the expectation that Patricia would protect her.

Shadow Gale clenched a fist and raised it up, trembling and tense, but she couldn't bring herself to drop it to the floor. She swung it down to hit her thigh instead. She hit her thigh a second, then third, time, and on the fourth time, the four silhouettes stood, so she stopped. Her thigh was numb with the pain.

What was the enemy trying to do? Were they trying to use Shadow Gale as a hostage, to manipulate Pfle? Did this have something to do with Pfle's memories that Shadow Gale had entrusted to Snow White? Was Snow White aware of this?

Maybe it was time to pay the piper—for Pfle and for Shadow Gale, too. But still, it wasn't like Shadow Gale had no urge to struggle. Patricia hadn't given her life to protect her so that she could mournfully spend her days in sorrow in this room somewhere. She would look for something that could be a hint as to where this was—and find a way to communicate that to the outside.

Keeping an eye on the black silhouettes to see if they moved, Shadow Gale knocked on the floor and walls. The creatures moved when she tried putting her ear to the door, so she gave up on that. But there was nothing anywhere that could be a hint. Reality was different from video games. There wasn't necessarily a flag somewhere. Effort wouldn't necessarily lead to something happening in response. Even the same action could lead to different EXP values earned, and there was variability in base stats. She'd been locked up to keep from getting away no matter what she tried, so just a little bit of searching around would not be enough to find an escape.

She could hear a voice in her mind telling her to give up. She was good at giving up. Her whole life had been nothing but resignation. This was also partly because a certain Kanoe Hitokouji was good at making people give up.

Should she give up? Or should she not?

Patricia's face rose in her mind and apologetic feelings along with it. Knowing when to give up was a weapon, but that depended on the situation. Had she already expended all the effort she could? Was there nothing else she could do? If it were Kanoe, she might

think up something.

Just the idea of trying to think like Kanoe put her right off it. But it had never been Mamori who had gotten them out of sticky spots—that was what Kanoe did. Shadow Gale got the feeling that Kanoe would have thought of something.

For the moment, Shadow Gale set aside action and shifted to thought instead.

What would Kanoe do? What sort of ideas would she come up with? While she was thinking, pondering, and racking her brain, before she could arrive at a solution, the room's door opened with the sound of grating rust.

And there was the armored magical girl who had fought Patricia.

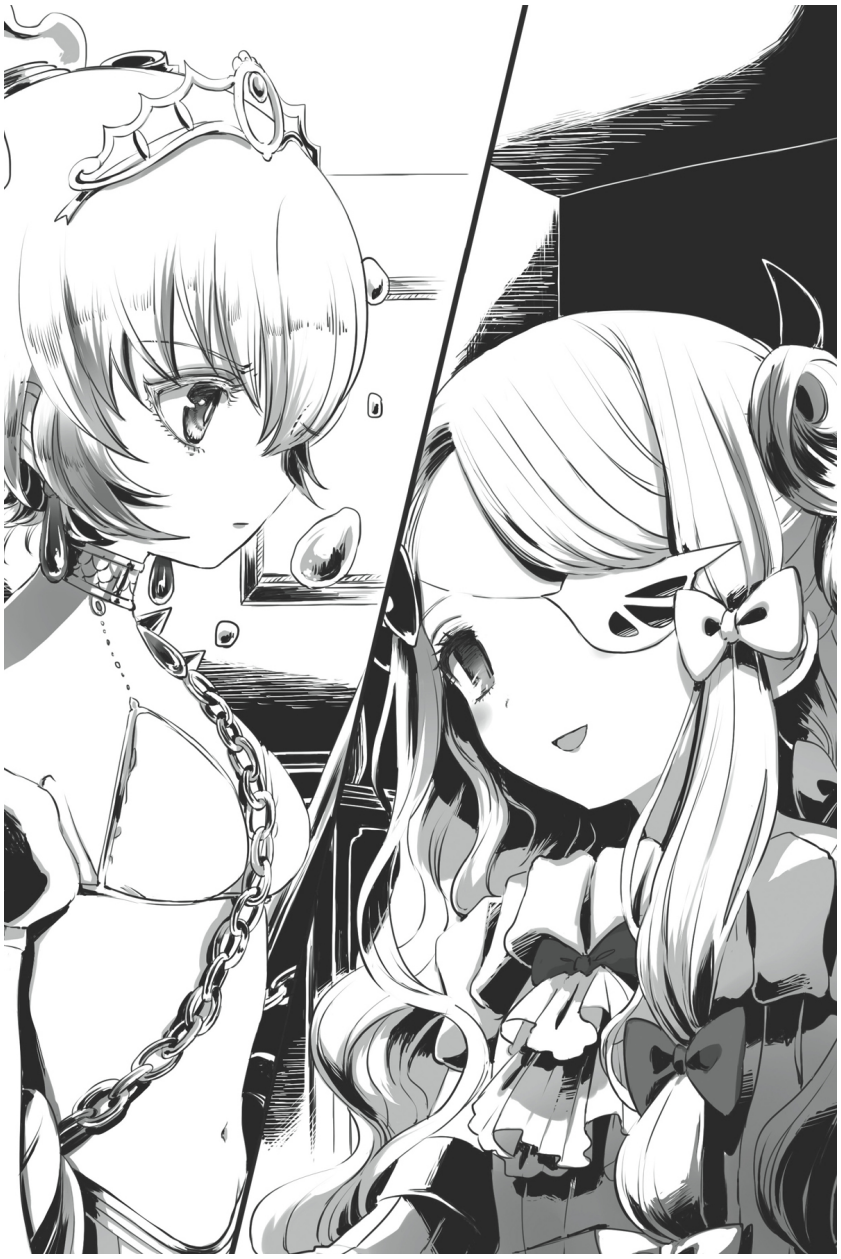
CHAPTER 2
TO STEAL LUCK

◇ **Pfle**

“Going out to negotiate a kidnapping personally is the sort of boldness I wouldn’t want to imitate.” As Pfle quipped from her wheelchair, she pulled a sudden turn on the carpet, fixing her gaze on the other figure.

Princess Deluge—of course she knew the name. She was one of the artificial magical girls who had been “developed” in the underground laboratory and was currently the only known survivor. After the incident, Princess Deluge was all the high officials of the Magical Kingdom had been talking about for quite some time.

It all began when Grim Heart had tried to obtain the artificial magical-girl project that a certain someone had been pushing forward. Relying on her powerful magic, Grim Heart had tried to steal all their research by force, but a bunch of magical girls had stopped her, her plan had failed, and everything had been exposed, leading to Grim Heart’s and Shufflin’s deaths in an “accident.” Everything up to that point was public information.



Now that artificial magical girl had come to blackmail Pfle.

Pfle had received notice that morning that her capable guards had been routed, Patricia included, and that Shadow Gale had been kidnapped. Less than an hour later, Deluge had contacted her, and after she had acceded to Deluge's demand to negotiate, the girl had immediately come herself.

The place of their meeting was Pfle's office. She was basically diving right into enemy territory, but she had no hesitation at all. She had to have absolute confidence in the negotiation material she held. In other words, she knew about Pfle and Shadow Gale's relationship, and there was no room for slipups in this negotiation.

Shadow Gale's—Mamori's—face rose in Pfle's mind, and she tapped at her forehead.

Pfle had done her utmost to avoid making Shadow Gale's existence public. Of those connected to the Magical Kingdom, there were a very limited few who knew of her relationship to Pfle. So Pfle doubted this was the kind of information Deluge could acquire on her own. Exactly who was pulling the strings behind her?

"…So then, what is your demand?" Pfle asked Deluge.

"I want you to lend me people. I don't need many; two or three is enough. But I'll need the strongest fighters you've got."

"What would you have them do?"

"…Well…"

"You're not going to tell me that's irrelevant, are you? You might express this demand in short as 'the strongest,' but the sort of abilities needed will vary depending on the situation. I can't offer you the most appropriate personnel without knowing your goal."

"…True."

"Since there is the possibility that Shadow Gale will not be returned if you fail, from where I stand as well, I must make the perfect selection."

"…You're being quite cooperative."

"You've compelled me to be so. Come, your goal."

"The Osk Faction is after Premium Sachiko, Puk Puck's protégé. I want to cut in and snatch her away."

That really wasn't something Pfle could respond to immediately.

"Surprising," Pfle said finally. "It's one thing to kidnap someone

to use as a ransom when demanding personnel to carry out yet another kidnapping, but to think you would *also* try to start a fight with two of the Three Sages, the highest powers in the Magical Kingdom, at the same time."

"Are you scared?"

"Of course I am. This isn't something a magical girl in her right mind would even conceive of. You do understand just what a grave demand you're making of me, don't you?"

"That's none of your business."

"What a cold thing to say to your ally in conspiracy, however hastily made. Though if you have any other allies, then do introduce us, please."

"…I've learned that Premium Sachiko has run away from Puk Puck's estate and that she's hiding somewhere in W City. Due to the lingering effects of the recent incident, neither the Puk nor Osk factions will want any big roundups. They'll have elites on each side wanting to retrieve Sachiko quickly. I want people who will be able to retrieve their target from under their noses."

"Oh-ho." Pfle examined the magical girl before her once more.

Facial expression, breathing, sweating, word choice, remarks—all these elements would speak to her character. Going by the records, this girl Deluge couldn't have been a magical girl for very long, but she was equipped with plenty of presence. She was cool and calm, capable of considering matters based on the material currently at hand. This could hardly be because she was an artificial magical girl.

"Understood," Pfle said. "Then I'll arrange for some magical girls immediately."

◇ Princess Deluge

She hadn't been told anything beforehand about this person called Pfle—merely that she had a lot of clout with various magical girls and that she was the head of the Magical Girl Resources Department. Deluge hadn't been interested in asking. She was also uninterested in what sort of relationship Pfle had with Shadow Gale. She was someone Deluge would use for the sake of her goal. That was all.

However, upon actually speaking with her, Deluge felt keenly

that she was not just any regular magical girl.

She reacted completely differently from what Princess Deluge had anticipated. She was unfathomably deep. If Deluge was to be negotiating with her, she couldn't let her guard down for even an instant. Deluge steeled her nerves once more without a single change in her facial expression.

Thinking about what she was about to do nearly made her legs tremble.

But there was no going back now.

Deluge didn't really remember what happened to her after the incident. It had mostly involved people taking blood and saliva samples and asking her questions over and over. Through that process, Deluge had learned who had and had not survived. All the Pure Elements, aside from Deluge, had been killed. The people who asked her questions had not taken care to show consideration about things like that.

After that was a complete blank. Thinking back on it in retrospect, it felt like about a month had passed, but she only had a vague memory of what she'd been doing, whom she'd been with, and where she'd been. There was just a hazy recollection of her living in a private residence together with the owner. She had the feeling the owner had been a magical girl and also that she'd been human. It seemed there had been many people there and also that there'd been only one; maybe they'd had a pet, but maybe there hadn't been any animals, either. She thought they'd been good people. She thought they'd been kind to her. That much she could vaguely recall.

For some reason having to do with the owner of the house, Deluge had been forced to move out of that temporary residence, and after that, she'd returned to her own home. It seemed the Magical Kingdom had used magic to deal with the situation; her family had reacted as if nothing unusual had happened.

After that, she remembered things decently enough.

At a rate of about three or four times a week, they had demanded she present herself at a building they'd called the headquarters of the Department of Research and Development. Deluge's role as an experimental subject was not over yet. At that facility, a magical girl who had introduced herself as Bluebell Candy was constantly poking her nose into something.

Then one day, Deluge overheard Bluebell admonishing another magical girl, and she now came to understand what her own position was.

Bluebell had said, “Her being an artificial magical girl has nothing to do with it—now she’s just another magical girl, like the rest of us.” Based on the context of that conversation, Deluge basically inferred that the “artificial magical girl” referred to her.

If she had been paying a little more attention to what went on around her, she’d probably have realized it earlier. Upon close examination, the magical girls looked at Deluge differently from others, and something felt off about the way they talked to her. Even before becoming Princess Deluge, as Nami Aoki, she’d had a sharp nose for such things. She had made accurate assessments of people’s opinions of her and where she herself stood; and so as to not be made an outcast, so as to not be bullied, she took great pains to carve out a position for herself in the class.

Over the past month, she’d been too overwhelmed to do that. She hadn’t gone to school, instead spending her days crying. Deluge pieced together information from her various chats with Quake, Inferno, and Tempest to find their houses, then she got permission to burn incense for them, take sketchbooks from Quake’s closet, and things like that. All their families were in mourning. Deluge had heard the families’ memories had been manipulated, but that couldn’t change the fact that the girls had died. In the sketchbooks, her friends smiled the same smiles.

Her life became a routine of staring at the sketchbooks on her bed and nothing else. After about half a month passed, her parents seemed to think they couldn’t allow things to continue like this, and they began to scold her more strongly, but even so, she continued to cry. She couldn’t talk to her family or anyone else. She couldn’t stop feeling sadness, regret, pain, and anger, either.

It was too hard to stay at home, so on Bluebell’s recommendation, Deluge went to the R&D Department building and began staying over in their break room.

During this period of misery, she had been thinking about her friends. She and the other three had been a team, as the Pure Elements: Princess Tempest, the cheerful and energetic elementary school girl; Princess Inferno, the active high schooler who loved sports; Princess Quake, the kind and reliable university student; and Deluge’s classmate, Prism Cherry.

Why had things turned out like this? Where had Ms. Tanaka, who had made them all into magical girls, gone? The Pure Elements' mission was supposed to have been fighting the Disrupters, creatures from another dimension—so why had they been forced to kill and be killed by other magical girls?

She remembered Filru, who had shown consideration to others until the end. It was that same consideration she showed to the enemy that got her killed. She'd been murdered while Deluge had survived. And for what purpose?

She remembered Prism Cherry, who had yelled that she was going to do what she could as she went right for the enemy. She'd been a poor fighter. She'd vaguely smiled her way out of joining their training bouts. But she had voluntarily fought the enemy herself and died as a result.

None of their deaths had been acceptable. None of them had wanted to die. They had all struggled to live, but they'd failed, and they'd been killed. By magical girls. By Grim Heart. By Shufflin.

Deluge wasn't overcome with sadness—just anger. According to Bluebell, Grim Heart and Shufflin had been arrested. There was no longer anyone she could take her aggression out on. Despite how all of them had been unable to do anything but run from those two, someone from somewhere had managed to capture them. The Pure Elements, who had been fighting to save the world, had not been heroes of a story or valorous characters of legend—they were treated as simple victims, and the villains had been punished through the actions of someone who was actually strong.

So then what had the Pure Elements been? For what purpose had they become magical girls?

Had Prism Cherry known? Bluebell told Deluge that Prism Cherry had been a "normal magical girl." Normal magical girls didn't have to take medicine periodically, and they could remain transformed at all times. A normal magical girl didn't need a Princess Jewel in order to transform. A normal magical girl couldn't do an Ultimate Princess Explosion when four attacked at once. A normal magical girl didn't fight Disrupters but rather went around town helping people in small ways.

Deluge learned everything from Bluebell, the only person who'd shown her any consideration when Deluge was miserable, the only one who would come talk to her; all the magical girls at the R&D Department headquarters seemed so busy, and no one would give

Deluge the time of day. At a glance, the headquarters looked like the brand-new high-rise office building for some business, and the people who worked within were also in a hurry in the way of businessmen.

Sometimes, Bluebell would use her magic to create magical candies that altered people's feelings. Creating a pretty green candy in her palm, she had prompted Deluge to put it in her mouth. Figuring it probably wasn't poison, Deluge put the candy in her mouth; as soon as she did, it melted away and vanished. The flavor was indescribable, like it could be bad or good. It did actually make her feel a little better. It didn't really make the thing stuck in her chest go away, but it made her feel like it had shrunk a little.

When Deluge had told Bluebell this, she'd been as pleased as if this were her own personal business, saying, "I'm so glad to hear that." And that had brought a smile out of Deluge, too. She thought this had to be the first time she'd smiled since the incident.

For some reason, it brought to mind Prism Cherry, who had worried about how her own magic might be useful. The girls put their heads together and came up with the strategy of showering the Disrupters with the light of the sun. Back then, Prism Cherry had smiled as if she was sincerely glad. Deluge felt like there was something about Bluebell that was similar to Prism Cherry. It was hard to put into words—something beyond just her magic or her aura. When Deluge looked at Bluebell, Prism Cherry's face automatically rose in her mind. Despite feeling Bluebell was being pushy with her kindness, it was hard to refuse.

Deluge started to spend more time with Bluebell, partly because no one paid Deluge any mind and also because Bluebell had the most free time of anyone at the headquarters. When Deluge was with Bluebell, for some reason, it made her remember her friends, and eventually, Deluge could no longer refuse Bluebell.

During the day, she would be with Bluebell, while at night, she was alone. The illusion of having her friends by her side crumbled away like a castle of sand, leaving Deluge alone, sitting on her bed. Quake was not there. Inferno was not there. Tempest was not there. Cherry was not there. They had all been killed. They'd been killed by official magical girls. When Deluge lifted her head, her friends were there, and when she reached out her hand, they vanished. Though she could hear their voices coming from somewhere, she couldn't see their faces. Every day was more of the same. Her

friends were not there. Because they were dead.

That was when the “friend” had made contact with Deluge.

◇ Pfle

“Come in.”

“Pardon me.”

Responding to the sound of the knock, she beckoned in the guests. A magical girl all in black came in first, while one with large glasses and another with a scholar’s cap and white coat followed.

“Long time no see.”

“Hiya.”

The scholar and the glasses girl came in rather cheerily and bowed to Pfle.

“Ohhh, looks like things have gotten pretty intense, huh?” said the scholar. “I heard Patricia got zapped during this kerfuffle. And one-on-one, too.”

The glasses girl was startled. “Whoa, really? That cavewoman, the one who was practically born to punch people? One-on-one?”

Though the content of their discussion was violent, they somehow seemed to be enjoying themselves.

“And they say the mercenaries she was in charge of all got snuffed, too,” the scholar girl added.

“Wow. All Patricia’s mercenaries were snuffed?”

They were like a comedy duo.

“They say the enemy was using new-model demons.”

“Oh, yiiiikes… Mind if I just go home?”

“Absolutely not. It’s a big no-go to collect a paycheck and then not do the work!”

The magical girl with the scholar hat was Micchan the Dictionary. The one with the glasses was Glassianne. Hardly anyone could tell at a glance that these two were skilled fighters. Even very sharp experts would be fooled. That was exactly why they could mingle with other magical girls and nonchalantly live ordinary lives.

Unlike those two, the one in all black, Dark Cutie, didn’t talk much. Since she’d been the model for a character in an anime, she’d stick out badly if she lived a normal magical-girl lifestyle. It didn’t take much for a celebrity to draw the attention of others. Rumor

had it that when she wasn't on missions, she spent all her time holed up inside, but who knew if she was the kind of magical girl who would sacrifice her lifestyle to live for her work. When this trio worked together, Dark Cutie was their leader.

"Patricia was a good person," Dark Cutie muttered, not really addressing anyone in particular.

"The good ones get killed by the bad guys," said Glassianne.

"That's cruel," said Micchan.

"Sure is. By the way, who's that?"

Micchan, Glassianne, and Dark Cutie's gazes all gathered on Deluge.

Showing no timidity at having all their eyes on her, Deluge glanced over at Pfle, then gave a small bow of her head.

Pfle opened her mouth. "You'll be under her command for this mission. I ask that you give her full support in accomplishing the objective."

Pfle could tell the three of them became more cautious. Eyes never leaving Deluge, Micchan asked to confirm, "Is *that* a request from the Magical Girl Resources Department?"

"Yes it is."

She wanted to be absolutely sure this client was from the Magical Girl Resources Department.

These three were highly skilled professionals who typically worked as normal magical girls, only summoned at critical times. Even with an introduction from Pfle, they weren't so cheap as to be hired by someone they had only just met, and they knew that the most dangerous thing of all was to be used with incompetence.

Their twisted unit leader was Dark Cutie, with her pride, anger, resentment, joy, regret, pleasure, and sense of both superiority and inferiority toward being a bad guy. Micchan the Dictionary was a born assassin who infiltrated enemy territory empty-handed, using all sorts of weapons to carry out her missions. Glassianne was the ultimate observer: She could see deep into enemy territory from the front lines or even holed up deep in a base.

These magical girls were not easy to deal with. Using them required much effort, too.

Putting her hands together, Pfle said to them, "Since we'll be fighting together from now on, let's introduce ourselves."

◇ **Princess Deluge**

The unsociable Dark Cutie, the mild-mannered Micchan the Dictionary, and Glassianne, who acted cheery but never smiled with her eyes—they were three very different magical girls, but they also had things in common. The three of them were entirely without weaknesses.

Deluge was going to use the three of them to carry out her goal. She was going to get revenge. Maybe someone was tempting her into this, maybe someone was leading her to do this, but that was fine. The facts were the facts, and if Deluge was standing here because of the sacrifices of her friends, even if she was just being used by someone who was trying to take advantage of her, she was fine with that.

It had begun with a piece of paper. There had been a single piece of copy paper folded on the bed Deluge had been using in the break room of the R&D Department. *I'm on your side. I'll tell you things you don't know* had been written on it, and after that, papers had been left there at irregular intervals.

All the information that came from this source was concerning, but no one could assure her if any of it was true or not. Deluge herself was the only one who could confirm anything.

Deluge decided to use Bluebell. When she told Bluebell, "My friends wanted to become great magical girls, and I want to carry out what they wanted. So I want to know more about magical girls, about the Magical Kingdom," tears had welled in Bluebell's eyes. "That's so admirable," Bluebell had praised her, and she'd begun showing Deluge around to places. It seemed that Bluebell not only had spare time, she also had a fair amount of authority, and she took Deluge to a wide variety of locations.

To the places where scouts went searching for those with magical talent.

To the places where many budding magical girls had gathered to take the exam to become official magical girls.

To the exclusive library where books about magical-girl history were kept.

Bluebell also guided her through a special gate to the ruins of a magical-girl prison and joined in with a group she said was doing combat training. They were also allowed to observe at a facility where she said they carried out research on items and mascot characters that helped magical girls.

Bluebell took personal joy in seeing that Deluge was starting to

do things proactively of her own accord, and she promised that if there was anything else Deluge wanted to do, anything she wanted to see, she need only ask.

When Deluge had said she wanted to see the Pure Elements' laboratory again, Bluebell hadn't looked happy, but when Deluge had pleaded earnestly that she really wanted to see it one last time just to remember them, she had somehow managed to get Bluebell to take her. The laboratory was cordoned off with tape here and there, and it was full of places they were forbidden to enter, but by making the request of a magical girl who seemed to be an investigator, they were able to enter the briefing room.

Bluebell looked around the area with curiosity. To Deluge, it was a nostalgic place. Though it had only been barely over a month, it felt like it had been long ago that she'd been a magical girl here. That was the table Inferno had scolded Tempest for putting her feet on. Tempest had burst into tears and buried her face in Quake's chest, and Quake had worn a very serious look as she petted Tempest's head. Just looking at the tables, chairs, ceiling, and walls made memories like that overflow in her. And then the memories that emerged at the very end of the end never changed.

Deluge made a request of Bluebell. She asked her, "I want to know how my friends died. Isn't there some way to find out?" Bluebell had been reluctant, saying that wasn't something she should know, but when Deluge had said passionately, "I want to know so I can get closure and move forward as a magical girl," Bluebell'd been instantly touched. Deluge had always been good at pretending to be earnest and sincere. Tears in her eyes, Bluebell had said, "Then I'll do want I can," and had helped her out. Thanks to her, Deluge had managed to learn how her friends had died.

She hadn't needed a week after that. Deluge used Bluebell's pass to sneak into the laboratory and seize some experimental subjects, including various items and the new-model Disrupters, and following the information and instructions of her "friend," she had attacked Shadow Gale and secured a new team as well.

◇ Pfle

Bringing the teacup to her lips, Pfle found it was already completely cold. She drank none of the lukewarm black tea, returning the cup

to the saucer, pushing it to the corner of the table with the back of her hand. The marble table was slippery. Moved along by momentum, the teacup fell off the side of the table, and Pfle caught it in her palm.

Magical girls did not require intake of nutrition via eating or drinking. There was no point to drinking black tea or eating snacks, but for various reasons—as a mannerly thing, or being enjoyable as an indulgence, or just by force of habit from being a human, many magical girls at least loved to drink tea. This was one of the things Pfle liked to indulge in as well, but cold black tea tasted bad, and she wouldn't enjoy it.

She leaned back in her wheelchair. She was the only one present. All the others were out on the job.

Pfle sorted out everything that had been on her mind all this time.

It seemed her memories were incomplete for some reason. And before she had been able to finish investigating the cause and reasons for that, this incident had occurred. Did the incident have nothing to do with that? That seemed very unlikely.

Pfle understood that Deluge had a deep grudge against the Osk Faction. Grim Heart had been an incarnation of Chêne Osk Baal Mel. Deluge surely thought of it as no different from Osk themselves having robbed the lives of her friends as well as the lives of those magical girls who had tried to save them.

The Puk Faction was trying to hold this ceremony while the Osk Faction was trying to disrupt it by force, and while the two forces fought in W City in the attempt to secure Premium Sachiko, they were going to snatch her away. The Osk Faction would see this as having been beaten to the punch. And if they were going to engage in some sort of negotiation with the Puk Faction, then having Premium Sachiko in hand would be serious leverage, too.

Pfle could understand this—but why had Deluge gone this far? This was a girl who had trained in a place secluded away from magical-girl society, and there was no way she could have known anything about the Osk Faction or the Three Sages. Pfle only learned of any intel that came to the surface because of her lofty position. She had sent her roots out in each department seeking information, and she even had a number of sources within the Central Authority. That was why she had been able to learn these things. Even if Deluge had been the victim in that situation, there

was no way she, as just one magical girl, could know such detailed information. And there was also the matter of Shadow Gale. Pfle had done her utmost to lay low and remain anonymous. There were only a limited number of people who even knew she existed.

Someone had told her. So then, who?

Having Deluge attack someone the Osk Faction wanted instead of the faction itself seemed like a fairly roundabout plan for someone who wanted revenge. If there was someone pulling the strings behind the scenes, then did that someone want Sachiko? Or did they want to make some deal with the Puk Faction? Just as they had kidnapped Shadow Gale to force Pfle's hand, were they trying to force the Puk Faction's hand by kidnapping Premium Sachiko? Was this an attempt to get involved in the ceremony the Puk Faction had planned? Was there something more significant to Premium Sachiko beyond her part in this ceremony? Often enough, all Pfle could do was guess at matters, but there were far too many elements here to even speculate on.

Three knocks jolted Pfle out of her thoughts.

"Come in."

Obeying her call, Micchan the Dictionary popped her face in. "Are we about ready?"

"I want you to carry out this task in such a way as to satisfy Deluge."

"I see… Roger that."

"Oh, hold on a minute." When Micchan was about to leave, Pfle called her to stop and pointed to her teacup. "It's grown cold. Could you make me a new one?"

"Wait just a jiffy." Micchan set a cardboard box on the floor and picked up Pfle's teacup. "*Koucha* [black tea] to *kombucha* [kelp tea]."

Steam rose from the cup in Micchan's hand, and a refreshing scent wafted toward Pfle's nose. She could sense the faint saltiness and savory taste of the kelp tea. Pfle's lips relaxed slightly into a smile, and she raised her right hand.

This magic was amazing no matter how many times she saw it. Just by changing one character of the name of the object she held in her hand to another, she could turn it into something else. Her magic was restricted to items of a size she could carry in her hand and also to inanimate objects, but even so, this ability was incredibly flexible.

“Should I make it into something else?” Micchan offered.

“I’m in the mood for kelp tea now. I think I’ll have this.” Politely accepting the proffered teacup, Pfle took a sip. “A fine job.”

“Great. Well then, I’m going back to work.”

Micchan left the room, and Pfle returned to her thoughts.

When Pfle stared at someone, she could understand their character. She had previously placed too much trust in this ability of hers, and she had been fooled by someone who hid her expressions with magic and also by someone who had disturbed her emotions. But of all the magical girls who seemed like they might be relevant, none of them had such magic. So was this person offering assistance from the outside?

A magical girl who had managed to make contact with Deluge and was currently acting on their own—the faces of a number of figures rose in Pfle’s mind, none of whom she would be glad to have betray her. Pfle sipped at the kelp tea.

◇ Glassianne

Over in the backyard, Glassianne waited for Micchan. That said, everything in this backyard—the garden trees, stones, lawn—looked expensive. It started to tick her off.

Once a month, Glassianne ran a cake shop. She’d bought a ramen shop with the interior included and remodeled it into a cake shop, and just one time per month, she’d open it up, and together with a magical girl who had a pastry chef motif, they would make magical cakes and sell them. When she heard statements like, “The storefront looks dingy, but the cakes are actually amazing,” or “I hear there are some really cute girls baking the cakes,” she would chuckle to herself. But this sudden summons meant her once-a-month fun had been canceled.

Micchan had also grumbled, “They just made a big library the next prefecture over, and I was planning to go today and have my fill.” Glassianne could sympathize.

But despite all this, the one they were supposed to be giving full backing, Princess Deluge, was not being cooperative. Had Glassianne been a teenager, back when she wasn’t as good with such things, Deluge would have made her want to shriek and give her a thwack. Deluge simply told them of her ultimate goal of

“nabbing Premium Sachiko,” and then remained completely silent without even the most minimal reply. She ignored requests to share information about one another’s magic—she didn’t even so much as say hello.

Black creatures that hovered with square wings on their backs circled around them, and it felt like if they were to approach Deluge with impudence, the creatures would attack. These were the magical life-forms that had been nicknamed “demons,” primarily used by mages as security. Glassianne had been handling backdoor work for the Magical Girl Resources Department for a fairly long time. She’d been both their allies and their enemies. But she’d never seen the type Deluge had brought with her.

In other words, they were a new model. If Deluge was a magical girl who was allowed to use a new model of demon, that meant she was a pretty big deal. She wasn’t someone you should be making mad, and she was, of course, not someone you’d be allowed to give a thwack. If something was scary, Glassianne wouldn’t touch it. If something was stinky, she’d put a lid on it. If you wanted to have a long life in this line of work, then you had to live wisely and cautiously. Those who were unable to handle a wise and cautious lifestyle would either go off the rails as a magical girl or go off the rails in life, one of the two. Glassianne had no intention of choosing either, so she wasn’t going to punch this girl. She wasn’t willing to abandon her lifestyle of getting paid highly for letting off stress on the odd occasion when she was summoned for work, while at other times, engaging in her baking hobby.

“Sorry, sorry, kept you waiting, huh?” Coming out of the back entrance of the house, Micchan the Dictionary waved a hand in front of her face in apology.

“No, hardly!” Glassianne replied. “Honestly, I’d be okay waiting here ten days if you wanted.”

“You’re always trying to slack off like that, Anne.”

“You say that, but whenever we get a job, it’s always bound to be something super dangerous, y’know? It’s just, like, I dunno. It just sucks!”

The two of them laughed for a while. Seeing that Dark Cutie alone was silent, Glassianne adjusted her glasses, and Micchan the Dictionary pulled together the collar of her white coat.

“Looks like this one’s gonna be pretty tough,” said Micchan. “The boss seemed different.”

“Sounds like there’s gonna be bodies… Aw, man.”

“Guess we’ve gotta be prepared if we’re sticking our noses into a power struggle among the Three Sages.”

In her work, Micchan was prepared to kill or be killed. Glassianne didn’t say, “*Wow, you’re being so serious!*” She only nodded. They were only ever called for troublesome or tough jobs, so this sort of thing did happen. She had no right to know things such as to what end the boss meant to interfere with that struggle.

“I’m all ready,” said Micchan.

“Ditto,” agreed Glassianne.

“Well then, as always,” said Dark Cutie.

“Then the mission starts now, huh?”

This was the first time Glassianne had heard Micchan the Dictionary expressly say something like “*The mission starts now.*” Dark Cutie, their unit leader, was the type to assume they would know this, even without it being said out loud. If it was only Micchan and Glassianne present, they wouldn’t need to make such an announcement. However, with Deluge on the team, things were different. Dark Cutie wasn’t capable of showing consideration, so Micchan’s way of showing care, figuring she couldn’t simply leave it to the boss, was the reason she was their number two. Micchan didn’t hold that title for nothing.

“Then let’s focus on Puk Puck’s estate first,” said Micchan. “Anne, would you mind shifting your visuals?”

“I shifted them the moment I heard we were going to W City, you know. Just leave it to me.”

Micchan the Dictionary was speaking particularly loudly, something she wouldn’t normally do even when giving instructions or telling someone off. She wouldn’t even raise her voice when she was getting emotional, not that she was the type to get all that emotional in the first place.

Glassianne understood why Micchan was speaking louder than usual. She was doing it so Deluge could hear, too. Though Pfle had ordered them to follow Deluge’s instructions, Deluge herself was completely refusing communication, so they had no choice but to have this briefing among themselves.

Micchan was trying to ensure their course of action was known to this presumed VIP without offending her. Glassianne could tell Micchan was taking care not to act callous toward Deluge, since even if she lacked communication skills, she was still a person in an

important position.

It wasn't that Dark Cutie was incompetent as a leader. This was basically about division of labor. Dark Cutie was a famous magical girl who had appeared in anime; that all-black costume of hers had a lot of presence. She had a dull look in her eyes but still a sense of presence. Often enough, things would go well simply by placing her at the front. Bluntly put, Micchan the Dictionary, with her scholar theme, and Glassianne, with the glasses and candy, would be underestimated due to their appearances.

And speaking of division of labor, Glassianne had her job to do, too. As for what she had done since being summoned that was anything like work, when Dark Cutie had asked for her impression of Deluge, Glassianne had replied, "She comes off villain-like." As long as she said this, Dark Cutie would treat Deluge as one of them for the time being. Glassianne had never asked Dark Cutie about her thoughts on villains. It was enough just to know that merely the act of characterizing someone as villain-like would make Dark Cutie treat them decently.

"Well, then—," Micchan began, then tensed. Dark Cutie crossed her arms and moved behind Micchan, and half a beat later, Glassianne positioned herself between the two of them.

"Deluge!" shouted a magical girl with a lily of the valley on her back. She'd emerged from the front door and crossed through the yard toward Deluge as if she didn't even see the trio's wariness toward her sudden entrance. "How could you do this? You should have told me if something was up!" she yelled as she shook Deluge by the shoulders. Deluge let it happen, her expression one of sincere irritation.

Micchan looked at Dark Cutie, but Dark Cutie's expression was cool as could be, with no indication that she was going to do anything. Before Micchan could look over at her, Glassianne quickly averted her eyes. Micchan heaved a sigh.

"Pardon me, Miss Deluge…"

Deluge looked at Micchan.

"Are we *all right* with that person?" Micchan's stance was low and she was polite, but she was forceful.

Deluge gave Micchan a grudging look, then immediately returned her gaze to the magical girl with the lily of the valley. "She's coming with us, too," she practically spat.

Glassianne snorted at how lax things had become—this raid felt

more like a family affair than anything.

◇ Bluebell Candy

When Bluebell Candy had first met Deluge, she'd mostly been just curious. She'd sensed a cool, *shounen*-manga sort of romanticism in the promotional line of "a magical girl created by human hands, without help from the Magical Kingdom." Bluebell was drawn to that sort of thing, hence why Deluge had piqued her curiosity. She'd sneaked a look at her from the shadow of a pillar.

After one glance, she became ashamed of herself for only being interested out of curiosity.

The despondent girl sitting on the waiting room chair, shoulders slumped, was a pitiful sight. But despite that, Bluebell felt that perhaps it was rude to feel pity for her. Bluebell tried to look away but couldn't bring herself to do so, continuing to squeeze the pillar as she watched Deluge. Though Deluge was pitiful, she was also very beautiful. The sparkling blue gem in her tiara and her similarly colored eyes should have been just as beautiful as those of any other magical girl, but Deluge was completely different.

Bluebell volunteered to take care of Deluge. She took care of her needs and desires and told off those who spoke badly of her. As a result, she was put on the receiving end of maliciousness herself; her snacks or her favorite pen would disappear, but even so, Bluebell did not leave Deluge.

The other magical girls in the Department of Research and Development hadn't paid any attention to her even before meeting Deluge anyway. Bluebell knew people spoke badly of her, calling her the odd one out, useless, and a do-nothing. This was just a change from being treated as an outsider to being treated as an obstacle. So then Bluebell came to the clean decision to do whatever she pleased, too.

Bluebell couldn't leave Deluge alone. If she did, Deluge would shatter and vanish. Bluebell had to stay with her in order to keep that from happening.

And slowly, bit by bit, Deluge had opened her heart to Bluebell. She started making requests of her, things like "*I want this; I'd like to do this*," and Bluebell tried to fulfill those requests as much as she could. Occasionally, Deluge would ask more of Bluebell than she

was capable of, but by begging her superiors repeatedly, somehow, she would get permission.

Once, Deluge showed her a sketchbook. Bluebell didn't know anything about art, but the lively drawings of smiling children looking as if they were having fun were good enough that at a glance, you'd think she was skilled. When Bluebell had praised it, saying, "This part is great," "That part is so well done," Deluge gave her shy but glad smiles.

She hadn't even imagined Deluge had a skill like that.

There were other sketchbooks, ones Deluge had promised to show her later. But before she could make good on that promise, Deluge had caused this incident.

Even now that things had come to this, Bluebell didn't want to abandon Deluge. Just having someone be there for Deluge would help support her. It had to.

That morning, when she came to work in the R&D Department office, Bluebell heard what Deluge had done. At first, she felt uncomfortable. Some magical girls had ostracized Deluge solely because she was an artificial magical girl. So Bluebell had assumed this was just heartless magical girls getting up to that sort of rumor-mongering.

But several things helped her to finally come around: the damaged laboratory and the disaster zone that was the reference room, her attempts to e-mail or call Deluge that never went through, and her discovery that even her own laboratory pass had disappeared from her wallet. She felt like her knees would give way, but this wasn't the time to fall apart.

The majority of the equipment, drugs, and research materials related to artificial magical girls had been snatched away. Two artificial magical girls created based on the research on Deluge, a machine for the manufacturing of new-model combat homunculi, and various other things had also been stolen. The burglar had beaten down the security homunculi and thrust weapons at the permanently stationed researchers, and then after they'd opened the safe for her, they'd gotten beaten down, too. And from the way the researchers described the burglar, she had to be Deluge. All the other circumstantial evidence pointed to Deluge as the culprit, too.

In the end, Bluebell went to the temporary bedroom Deluge had been borrowing and discovered a folded piece of paper that had

been left on her bed.

After reading it, Bluebell dropped all her work for the afternoon and dashed out after Deluge.

◇ Micchan the Dictionary

It looked like the lily of the valley magical girl was someone Deluge knew. And since Deluge had recognized her, Micchan's crew had no right to drive her away.

The aforementioned magical girl and Deluge were still quarreling over something.

"So who is that girl anyway?" Micchan asked.

"Looks like an acquaintance," answered Glassianne.

"Seems like this'll take some time."

"Yep."

"Should we have some tea?"

"We just had some, though. If I drink any more, my stomach'll be all full of water."

"I got a request today." Micchan stuck a hand into her bag, pulled out three sheets of colored paper and permanent markers, laid them on the table, and pushed them over toward Dark Cutie. "Some acquaintances asked me for autographs. Leader, would you be so kind?"

Without a word, Dark Cutie picked up the marker and removed the cap with a pleasant-sounding *pop*, then slid the marker along the colored paper.

"Wow!" crowed Glassianne. "Precisely what I'd expect of a famous magical girl! You must be used to signing and getting asked for autographs!"

"Your fame takes a real leap if you get made into an anime, after all," agreed Micchan.

"And the *Cutie Healer* series in particular is such a major title! That's so cool! So, so cool! I'd love to get made into an anime, too, just once! I want to get aired under a title like *Super Glasses Girl*, something like that!"

Micchan knew the rumors surrounding Dark Cutie. Word on the street was when *Cutie Healer Galaxy* was still on air, there had been a scandal involving the boss of the public relations department, forcing them to resign. Then, the new department head meddled

with production and changed the course of the show. As a result, the show had ended with Dark Cutie's character in a horribly unresolved position.

Micchan had visited Dark Cutie's house once in the past. She'd just meant to come over for a bit to say hi, but she'd wound up staying in that dim room of an apartment building that looked like it had been built fifty years ago, watching the whole *Cutie Healer Galaxy* anime DVDs from start to finish. Toward the end, at the point where Dark Cutie swore revenge against the heroes before disappearing into the throng, the real Dark Cutie had turned off the DVD. The screen had instantly switched over to a serious-looking newscaster seated in the center of the screen. Strangely, Micchan had a clear memory of the foreign news about an eight-year-old girl who'd wrapped herself in explosives and set off a massive explosion in a marketplace.

"That reminds me," said Micchan. "Have you heard about what happened with the next part?"

"You mean the next season?" said Glassianne. "They were saying they finished selecting a candidate for the leading role, right? Yeah, they totally were."

"Yep, about that. They'd practically chosen somebody, but apparently they're back to square one."

"Whaaa?! But why?"

"'Cause she leaked online that she'd be involved with the next season of *Cutie Healer*."

Glassianne put her finger to her glasses as they began to slide down, pushing them back up. With a deliberate-sounding sigh, she shrugged dramatically. "Why'd they do something like that?! Seriously, what a waste."

"It really is, right?"

"Uh-huh, totally. I wish they'd make an anime of me, too."

"You just said that. *Magical Glasses Girl*, right?"

"I told you, it's *Super Glasses Girl*! And don't you forget it!"

For magical girls, getting made into an anime was real status, a fantasy. When you watched a lot of magical-girl anime from childhood and then got to actually be a magical girl yourself, of course you would aspire to be made into anime, too. Micchan thought it'd be nice if even magical girls who did shady work like her and Glassianne could get made into anime. In fact, perhaps it was precisely because they did questionable work that they had

such a desire.

"But like," said Glassianne, "we've all been told magical girls aren't supposed to be on social media. So she messed up."

"Nobody's openly being like, '*I'm magical girl so-and-so*.' But I hear there are quite a lot of magical girls who talk anonymously."

"If you're anonymous, you wouldn't get found out, right? Honestly, what a waste. It's such a waste, my mom's bound to come in here with a lecture."

"Even if it's anonymous, if you tweet about what you're doing, people will naturally figure out who it is."

"Oh, is that how it works?"

"Done." Dark Cutie held out some lovely "autographs from a famous person" to Micchan—at a glance, you wouldn't know what was written on them. There was a little Dark Cutie face drawn on the corner of each piece of colored paper.

"Thank you so much." Micchan carefully wrapped them in cloth, then put them back in her bag.

"Leader, are you not into social media?" asked Glassianne.

"There's no reason for me to be."

"She's smart about these things," said Micchan.

"Ohhh, gotcha. I guess there's no need to bother getting involved with risky stuff, huh?"

At some point, the chat had turned into a discussion about work.

"If we're up against the one who defeated Patricia, it's gonna be pretty tough," said Micchan.

"You said that before," Glassianne reminded her.

"I'll say it as many times as I want."

"Actually, it might not be her." Dark Cutie lowered her voice. "Patricia was defeated by a magical girl who uses a trident."

Glassianne readjusted her glasses; Micchan's eye twitched.

"You mean…?" Micchan got a look at Deluge out of the corner of her eye. She was still quarreling with the lily magical girl. A trident was leaning up by her side. "Looks like we've got a sticky situation."

"I heard some stuff about new-model demons, too."

The "black silhouettes with square wings" that hovered around Deluge were clearly new-model demons.

Dark Cutie interrupted Glassianne, probably on purpose. "We're not in a position to decide whether this is something we ought to

involve ourselves in."

"I'd be grateful to have someone so strong as an ally, though," said Glassianne.

Deluge stood in the corner of Micchan's eye. When Micchan looked over at her, her expression had changed. Deluge seemed angry but also glad.

"We have a report from a scout. There was a battle between magical girls in W City, where Puk Puck's estate is located. The scuffle took place at the municipal park." That was all Deluge said. She then leaped up from the spot, and two demons came flying in to lift her up under both arms. A few more demons followed suit as she rapidly ascended into the sky until, eventually, she was out of sight.

That was quick. Deluge was moving fast, but then again, so was the enemy.

"I guess that means she doesn't need anyone who can't keep up," Micchan muttered, and the three of them stood. None of them were wage thieves who would use that as an excuse to stay behind.

"*Taku* [table] to *kaku* [bishop]." Lifting up the marble table, Micchan turned it into a shogi piece. "*Kaku* [bishop] to *kami* [paper]." And she turned that into a big, thirteen-feet-squared sheet of paper. Micchan took the right side of the sheet, while Glassianne took the left, and Dark Cutie faced the light of the sun, squinting, as she spread her arms wide to make wings. The shadow wings projected onto the poster board flapped, and Micchan and Glassianne let go of the paper. Now they didn't have to support it anymore.

Dark Cutie held Micchan in a so-called bridal carry and had Glassianne sit delicately on top of her. Flapping her great wings, Dark Cutie flew into the sky. The lily-themed magical girl just barely managed to leap at them and cling to Dark Cutie's leg. She swayed a little, but she was stable.

It was the middle of the day, so they had to take care not to be seen. They would have to fly at a high altitude.

"Sorry! Please take me with you!" cried the lily-themed magical girl.

"Sure, sure," said Micchan. "If you're an acquaintance of Miss Deluge, then that's fine with me. But you'll have to protect yourself."

INTERLUDE

The armored magical girl rattled as she moved. There had been too much going on when Shadow Gale had been watching her fight from Patricia's back, but either this armor was rusty, or the size was off, as it was just noisy.

The armored girl closed the door behind her. It creaked as she did. And it was heavy. At a glance, the door was pretty thick. It might be difficult for someone of Shadow Gale's strength to destroy in one blow.

"Do you…need something?" Shadow Gale asked as she started backing up to the edge of the room. But since the shadows were there, she kept away from the four corners, going to stand a little back from the center of the room. She didn't look great. She couldn't deny she was scared. If this armored girl were to declare that the prisoner was now unnecessary and come swinging at her, Shadow Gale probably couldn't even resist.

The armored magical girl rattled as she tilted her helmet. It resembled a tilt of the head, but her posture was unnatural, compared with that of a human. Shadow Gale had assumed that since she was strong and sturdy enough to exchange blows with a magical girl, of course she also had to be a magical girl, but maybe the armored being actually wasn't. There was something inhuman about the way it moved.

The armor spread both its arms, closed its palms, opened them, and shook its arms up and down. Shadow Gale furrowed her brow. She couldn't understand what it was trying to say.

"If there's something you want to say, then please be clear about it."

The armor didn't respond; it just repeated the same motions. It seemed unable to talk. The one thing Shadow Gale could sort of get was that the armor was trying to communicate somehow by responding to Shadow Gale's actions. That made her different from

the black silhouettes that remained at the ready in the four corners of the room, kind of like the four auspicious beasts of Chinese legend, only reacting mechanically when Shadow Gale moved. Even if Shadow Gale and the armor couldn't communicate, she could sense the armor wanted to.

"Um, well then. Do you think you could you let me out of here?"

The armor stomped on the concrete, almost as if in frustration. At the very least, it didn't look like it was saying yes. Shadow Gale had just figured she might as well give that a shot, so she wasn't disappointed, but she couldn't even be sure as to whether her message had even got through.

It didn't take much time for Shadow Gale to figure if the armor didn't understand words, maybe she should use body language, too. Shadow Gale pointed first to the entrance, then at herself, then swung her arms to indicate running. She meant to communicate, "*I want to go out the exit*."

The armor brought her right hand before her face and waved it. *Ohhh*, Shadow Gale thought. That was a clear rejection. If the armor was saying no, that meant that they had no intention of letting her go. That fact was not a good thing, but she was grateful that it seemed the body language was getting through. She felt as if it had been a long time since she had last communicated with someone.

Shadow Gale thought about the things she wanted to know.

What she wanted to do was get outside quickly. Once Pfle found out that Shadow Gale had been captured, she might do something reckless, and if that happened, Snow White would kill Shadow Gale. That disaster would be difficult to avoid since Pfle herself didn't know about this. If Shadow Gale could just get out of here quickly, she wouldn't have to evade the disaster, because it wouldn't happen. And what she needed to that end was information.

Was Patricia safe? Where was this place? What had Shadow Gale been kidnapped for? What kind of group were these people? Did they have a grudge against Pfle? Did this have to do with Pfle's work?

There was probably no point in even trying to engage in negotiation. If these were people who could be negotiated with, then Patricia would have seen a different fate. Even if Shadow Gale were to try to compromise with them and offer to provide

information or do something for them with her magic, wouldn't they just wind up demanding even more than what she'd conceded? She could predict them demanding something unreasonable, like Pfle's life, or cooperating with them to destroy the Magical Kingdom.

So then there was no need to compromise. She'd deceive the enemy and use that opportunity to escape or contact the outside. They were the ones who had come to attack her. They had no right to complain about her tricking them after they'd made her their prisoner.

"I really have nothing to do here. Could I at least watch TV? I'd like to kill some time." Shadow Gale drew a square shape with her hands, then posed like she was watching it intently, and then she had both her hands faceup toward herself. Expressing with her whole body that she wanted a TV, she repeated these actions. The armor, which had been looking up intently at Shadow Gale's miming, clapped her hands, turned around, and left the room. The rusted door created as it closed, and watching, Shadow Gale let out a cry of joy.

If she could get a TV, then she'd have this whole thing in the bag. Shadow Gale could modify machines with her magic. She'd have to tamper with it slowly, bit by bit, so as not to be noticed by the shadows that kept watch around her. She could certainly get information from the outside but also let Pfle know about where she was and make the TV fire off fatal rays so she could escape—well, maybe that wouldn't happen, but it would be ten steps ahead from now, where she had nothing more than her costume.

If her captors had known of Shadow Gale's magic, they would never have given her a TV, but it seemed the armor wasn't worried about that. So then ultimately, they were unaware of her magic, just kidnapping and confining her as an accessory to Pfle, weren't they? Mamori Totoyama's life had generally been like that. She never stood out or got attention as anything but an accessory to Kanoe Hitokouji.

In the past, this fact had made her feel fed up with herself. She'd felt overcome with sorrow, too. But now, her tendency to be forgotten was an asset.

After about five minutes, the armor came back. It was holding a cardboard box about twenty inches squared. Heart pounding hard, when Shadow Gale opened the box, she saw a portable-style

temporary toilet.

Maybe this thing was absolutely vital for humans, but it was harder than imagined for Shadow Gale to explain through gesture that this wasn't what she wanted right now.

CHAPTER 3

A HANDSHAKE WITH ME AT THE AMUSEMENT PARK

◇ **Sorami Nakano**

—*We've been attacked by the Osk Faction.*

Sorami was putting on a strong front, but her heart was hammering hard. Her tongue felt stuck inside her mouth. If she lost focus, her legs would shake. Uluru's magic had worked perfectly, earning them a bloodless victory. But if not for that, they would have had to fight head-to-head. The enemy had spears. They'd use them to thrust and stab. If Sorami got stabbed, she'd bleed, and depending on where she was stabbed, she'd die.

Sorami hugged her body. She was getting belated chills.

Though she knew she'd heard before that the Osk Faction were after them, it hadn't seemed real until she'd witnessed it firsthand. It had been like a fairy tale happening somewhere else. Until just now, Sorami would have reacted with a snort to the idea that they really would wind up fighting, like, "*You're thinking too much about it.*"

"Hurry! Let's get going and move on!"

Uluru was more irritable than usual. Her cheeks were red, probably more out of excitement than fear. She was proud of the results of this fight, that she had beaten the opponent with her magic. It was impressive that she could act even haughtier than usual after fighting enemies who'd seriously tried to hurt them.

As Sorami had figured, Snow White and Uluru had good magical compatibility. Snow White would quickly pick up on Uluru's lies no matter how she framed them. And since she'd realize Uluru was lying, the effect of Uluru's magic would wear off. Snow

White would be the ultimate opponent against Uluru. But with Snow White as her ally, Uluru wouldn't have to worry about her allies getting tricked. Sorami was used to her magic, so she was different, but for a magical girl they'd joined up with in the last day or two, it was a major advantage to not have to hold back.

With the two of them leading the fight from here on out, things were sure to work out.

Making a conscious effort to deepen her shallow breathing, Sorami slowed her heart and calmed her mind. If she only ever thought about herself, they would surely fail. She'd known of this enemy, the Osk Faction, before, and now that vague entity had a clear form and was attacking together with this fear. And not just Sorami and Uluru—the one who would be taking the brunt of this would actually be Sachiko.

Exactly how self-aware was Sachiko? Sorami thought Sachiko was lacking in that area compared with herself. If she'd been self-aware, wouldn't she have stayed holed up in the estate, no matter how great the pressure was of taking on the critical role in this ceremony? It was better than being chased around by an armed group that would swing weapons at their opponents without mercy.

Thinking about Sachiko instead of herself was calming. Sorami had come out to save Sachiko. Sorami could protect herself, and she had Uluru, Snow White, and Fal. Sachiko was all alone somewhere. She had to be trembling.

According to Snow White, the enemy who had just attacked them was only one part of a big group, and there were still nearly fifty more left. Because that many magical girls may have been deployed in the city, Sorami felt they had to find Sachiko as fast as possible.

Uluru went ahead at a trot, and Snow White and Sorami followed after her. Each building Sorami passed, she touched to check what was inside. Earlier, she had narrowed her target to Sachiko only, but now she made sure to investigate for the presence of any enemies, as well. Fal's radar and Snow White's mind-reading magic couldn't tell you what had happened in the past. Checking for traces of magical girls in the buildings as they went along, Sorami finally found something.

"It looks like sis went through here," she said.

"When?"

"This morning, around when the stores were just opening."

It was a department store. Sachiko wasn't actually in there at the moment. She'd gone from the large department store entrance to the back exit, heading outside.

Sorami remembered all the places they had visited with Sachiko. Once Sachiko exited the back entrance of this department store, then where would she go? The *senbei* factory they'd visited for that one field trip? The retail shop beside it? The wholesale supermarket they'd gone to on an errand for Puk Puck? The city hall branch office?

"I don't think she'd go any place that's too much of a hassle, you know?" said Sorami.

When Sachiko was feeling upset, or when something scary or unpleasant happened, she would often run away from home. She always went places she'd gone before. Once, she'd gone to hide in the wilderness where they'd gone on a field trip; in another instance, she'd idled away time in a mall where they often went shopping. Wherever she went, it would be based on her experience, and she'd avoid anywhere unfamiliar to her. You could call this cowardly, but it could also be a cowardly sort of wisdom. Ask Uluru, and she'd say that somewhere in Sachiko's heart, she wanted to be found, so she always ran to places she knew.

Sachiko, Uluru, and Sorami had no opportunities for excursions unless under orders from Puk Puck because they'd been brought to the estate in order to serve her. When Puk Puck left the city, they would accompany her, but fundamentally, their sphere of activity was limited to W City.

"What do you think, sis?" asked Sorami. "Where would she go from the back entrance of the department store?"

Uluru raised her hanging head. "If she's gone that direction, then the amusement park, probably."

"The amusement park?"

"Former amusement park, or more precisely, what's left of it. Uluru thinks it went out of business last year."

"Oh right, now that you mention it, I do remember."

It had been called an amusement park, but it hadn't been anything fancy enough to lure in tourists from other prefectures. There had just been a monkey enclosure, an adventure playground, a monkey train with a monkey driver, and some shops. Sorami was impressed they'd kept going until the year before in this economy.

She thought back to their childhood.

They had played at the amusement park once when Sachiko was six years old, once when she was seven, and once when she was ten. At six, Sachiko had cried because she was scared of the monkeys, but Puk Puck had given her a soft-serve ice cream bought from the shop, and Sachiko had seemingly forgotten all about the monkeys, ecstatically chomping into it, winding up covered in ice cream all around her mouth and down her neck. At seven, Sachiko wasn't scared of monkeys anymore, so they finally got to ride on the monkey train, but it seemed she hadn't been entirely over her fear, as she'd tried to get off the train partway and caused a fuss, and Puk Puck had rushed to go buy her an ice cream. At ten, Sachiko was too old for the monkey train, so they'd played on the adventure playground, where Uluru had started a fight with another kid, and Puk Puck had bought everyone ice cream to smooth things over, and then the children who'd been watching the fight from a distance wanted ice cream, too, so Puk Puck had bought even more. Even now, Sorami vividly remembered the bizarre sight of all the children who'd been playing on the playground licking ice cream. There'd even been some bad kids double-fisting ice cream cones.

Thinking back on it like this puzzled Sorami.

"You think Sachiko'd go to the amusement park?" she asked Uluru.

"Why do you think she wouldn't?"

"I mean, she doesn't have any decent memories of the place, does she?"

Sachiko was either crying or getting ice cream all over her face or all in a panic when that fight had started. None of those seemed like good memories.

"That's not true."

"You think?"

"Yeah, I do." Uluru started walking off, confident for some reason, heading through the automatic doors of the department store to go inside. Sorami and Snow White followed behind.

There were two instances when Uluru looked confident: times when she was actually confident, and times when she was forced to fake it because she'd otherwise look bad. In the former instance, Sorami knew that even if the basis for her confidence was feeble, she would actually succeed.

I'd like it to be the former, if possible, Sorami thought as she swiftly followed after her.

◇ Uluru

Uluru remembered one thing: That one time, Sachiko hadn't been scared of monkeys, which meant this had to have taken place when she was ten. It had been boiling hot out. Uluru also seemed to recall having an ice cream cone in hand, too.

Sachiko and Uluru had been side by side peering into the monkey enclosure. Uluru had been thinking something like *That monkey looks like Sachiko when she cries*. Sachiko had pointed to the back of the monkey enclosure, asking, "What's going on over there?" and Uluru had told her, "That leads to the monkey house." Sachiko had been impressed, saying, "So the monkeys can just hide in there if they get hot, huh?"

Her remark of "They can just hide" had stuck with Uluru.

Coming out the back entrance of the department store, she hailed a taxi and told them their destination: "The site of the old amusement park." Three young girls taking a taxi to an abandoned amusement park in the middle of the day on a weekday would probably be cause for some alarm, but they had to catch Sachiko before the Osk Faction found her. But still, they couldn't be racing around at full speed in the middle of the day, so a taxi was much better.

"Who's gonna pay?" asked Sorami.

"No complaints," Uluru snapped back. "We can get them to issue a receipt."

The front entrance of the amusement park was cordoned off by a thick chain and a sign that read No Trespassing in large letters. To magical girls, something like that may as well not be there. The taxi left, and they made sure there was no one around. The trio crossed over the wall in one bound and entered the amusement park.

It was desolate and crumbling. The shop sign was coming off and tilted at a diagonal. A yellow rope was strung around the adventure playground, along with a sign reading Do Not Use. The garbage scattered around the parking lot had to have come from homeless people or motorcycle gangs using it as their hideout. Uluru had heard that abandoned facilities were in fashion. Apparently, there were even people who'd pay money to buy photo collections of abandoned buildings. Just what was so fun about the scenery at a place like this? It brought memories to the forefront of Uluru's mind and made her feel lonely.

The three of them checked their position on the map near the entrance, then headed for the monkey enclosure.

"Magical girl detected. Just one, pon," Fal called out.

Sorami shrugged. "Looks like we got a hit."

"Don't let your guard down. We don't know for sure it's Sachiko," Uluru cautioned, even though she also thought it was probably her. It would be a little strange for one enemy to come alone all the way to the amusement park to wait for them. Crossing over missing steps and the cracks in the promenade, they headed toward the ping on Fal's radar.

"I can hear her," said Snow White. "She's thinking she doesn't want to be found."

That 99 percent certainty became 100 percent. No other magical girl in W City would be hiding alone, thinking something like that. They were at the caretaker entrance at the back side of the monkey enclosure.

Uluru squared her shoulders and strode on ahead to kick open the entrance door. "Sachikooo! Heeey!"

She heard a tiny yelp from within. She waited about ten seconds. No reaction. Nothing came out. Uluru stomped her foot loudly. The concrete cracked, and they heard another little *yeep*.

"Sachiko! If you won't come out, then Uluru is coming over there!"

"Hey." Sorami came to stand beside Uluru, positioning herself a little ahead of her. "Hey, Sachiko. Sis. Why don't you just come out? You get that we've found you, right? If Uluru tries to do anything, then I'll stop her for you, 'kay?"

Sorami's expression was exasperated, her tone mediating. Snow White was staying a half a step behind them, perhaps indicating they should solve things among themselves. Uluru also wanted to avoid airing any more dirty laundry. She didn't want to make a big scene in front of Snow White, in particular. If she looked on Uluru and her sisters with scorn, that was also scorn toward Puk Puck. And if Puk Puck was humiliated because of Uluru and her sisters, then they'd be far past the point of no-snack punishments.

Uluru breathed in deep, exhaled, then cleared her throat. "You can't be thinking you can keep running now, can you? Come out already."

There was the *thunk* of a chair falling. A face timidly emerged from the other side of the table. Her lightly waved golden hair was

reminiscent of Puk Puck's, something Uluru had once been jealous of.

"Will you really not be mad…?"

Sachiko didn't apologize or explain herself; she just looked like she was on the verge of tears and worried about her sisters getting mad at her. Uluru's pulse had been calming down, but now it boiled up all at once, and before she knew it, Sorami was holding her hands behind her back.

“See! You’re getting mad after all!” wailed Sachiko.

“Uluru!” said Sorami. “Calm down! There’s seriously no point in getting angry now, sis!”

“Sachiko, you absolute idiot!” Uluru yelled. “How can you cause us this much stress and still be worrying about whether Uluru’s going to get mad at you?! You really are a hopeless idiot! Uluru’s gonna sock you one good! Maybe a hit will set your stupid head straight!”

The signboard that said No Entrance was knocked over, sending dust billowing up. Cardboard boxes, scrap wood, thick rope for the adventure playground, pulleys, and iron pipes were stacked up, blocking the way.

This place was small. Five steps forward would cover the whole thing, and Uluru’s yelling, Sachiko’s wailing, and Sorami’s cries rang through it. Uluru kicked at air, Sachiko ran around trying to escape, and Sorami held Uluru’s arms behind her back.

What stopped the big fuss was the shrill voice of the digital fairy. “Magical girls detected! Lots of them, pon!”

Snow White passed by Uluru’s side, entering with flowing movements. Without giving them the time to be surprised, she thrust the butt of her *naginata* into Sachiko’s stomach, and when she let out a muffled shriek and crumpled, Snow White tossed her into the bag at her waist.

“Let’s go.” With that one remark, Snow White raced outside, Uluru and Sorami rushing after her.

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

Trying to overturn through violence something that had been decided by majority rule was not to Hamuel’s tastes. But if this was what her master wanted, Hamuel was obligated to grant that wish. That was an underling’s job.

The key figure in the ceremony was to be Puk Puck’s protégé, Premium Sachiko. Puk Puck needed to have Sachiko at hand or she couldn’t hold the ceremony in the first place. A hidden spy had brought them the incredibly valuable information that Sachiko had run away, following which the Osk Faction had acted quickly. If they were to try laying a hand on Sachiko while she was in Puk

Puck's estate, then that was war. But if they were to make friends with a magical girl who had fled the estate, that was just personal business. If there was some violence in the process, well, that was common enough among magical girls. Such acts could be justified through expressions such as "*They were close enough to fight*" or "*A friendship forged in fire*."

Hamuel was already finished analyzing their combat abilities. There was the Magical-Girl Hunter Snow White, plus two of Puk Puck's subordinates. The Magical-Girl Hunter used powerful mind-reading magic, and the girl with the gun would make you believe whatever she said. The other one had been touching buildings on their way along and making reports to the other members. She probably used a sort of detection magic. So then it would be quite doable for Shufflin and Hamuel to suppress them.

With Snow White in the lead, the three magical girls left the hut. They were heading to the east side of the amusement park, trying to leave. Premium Sachiko was not with them. Judging from all the commotion, they'd probably discovered Sachiko inside the hut and brought her along; they wouldn't have left her there. Hamuel zoomed in with the telescope she'd had the diamond Shufflins make for her. Aside from her costume, Snow White was equipped with a *naginata* and a bag hanging from her waist. It was probably a magical item—it was fairly obvious she had put Sachiko inside the bag.

Hamuel sent a message through her wireless radio. "B Team, please circle westward, following C Team. Focus your forces in the vicinity of the rear entrance. Monitor the area, too. Do not let the enemy leave the amusement park. E Team, switch your Taser guns for birdlime guns. Make range your priority. Avoid friendly fire. All clubs, lift your invisibility spells. The enemy has superior abilities in midrange enemy detection."

Hamuel could use her magic to compensate for Shufflin's weakness: Individual units couldn't share information among themselves. None of these enemies were capable of attacking a target at high altitudes. If Hamuel observed the battlefield from up high with a telescope when giving orders, they wouldn't be able to touch her. Furthermore, she'd had the diamonds make various weapons and also had them put stab-proof plates into the Shufflins' costumes. With the technical prowess of the diamonds, you could produce weapons and armor that could withstand use by magical

girls. Arming the diamonds, who were fundamentally noncombat personnel, greatly enhanced the combat capabilities of the overall whole.

"C Team, go straight to joining up with the Ace. Generally, the Ace of Spades should be the only one fighting the Magical-Girl Hunter. All others will back her up while also attacking the other magical girls. E Team, please take up position on the roofs. That way, you'll have control over the area below. Use the birdlime guns now. Even if the enemy moves, stay where you are."

Both sides made contact, and the battle began. Only Hamuel's side could attend to tactics with a grasp of the whole map of the battlefield. That advantage was not something that could be overcome by a few strong individuals. The enemy shied away from the birdlime on the eastern side that the Shufflins fired from, and they tried to head west instead, but that end had been firmly secured by the clubs. When the enemy tried going north, they were met with sweeping fire from the roof of the adventure playground facility, while from the south, the elite squad spearheaded by the Ace of Spades approached.

Snow White smoothly dodged, and a faint-yellow adhesive lump missed its target and hit the ground. Three more shots came to block off the sidewalk, then three more. Snow White nimbly evaded every shot.

But however many she evaded, it wouldn't pose a problem for Hamuel. This magical birdlime had been specially made by Shufflin, and even if it missed, it would stay in place to act as a fixed trap. Even a magical girl would get stuck in place if she stepped on one. Although Snow White could read the minds of her attackers, if she lost any places to dodge to, she would have no choice but to get hit.

It looked like the magical girl with the gun was yelling something, but it was no use. Hamuel had made all the Shufflins plug their ears. Since Hamuel's directions echoed directly in their minds, there was no need for them to hear any outside noise.

"Units going for close-range combat, you can be ready to run—just run. Your greatest priority should be to avoid getting killed. Make sure to guard your vitals. Please focus only on acting as a wall. There's no need for you to finish them off. You simply have to take them out of the fight, either with the birdlime or the Taser guns is fine."

Snow White spun and thrust her *naginata*, driving the Shufflins

back, but the stab-proof plates kept her from killing them in one strike. When she opened up holes in the formation by pushing Shufflins back, they were instantly filled by more Shufflins.

Hamuel gradually had the Shufflins close in on the enemy. Now, once she took one or two of the opponents out of the fight using the birdlime, nets, or Taser guns, all she had to do was advise them to surrender.

Victory seemed to be within arm's reach when there was a sudden *whoosh* of wind. Hamuel twisted around but failed to dodge, and blood spurted from her arm.

—An ambush!

Eerie black creatures were circling around her. These were the magical life-forms they called "homunculi"—or also "demons." Even right here, there were six in total. Looking down below, the Shufflins were under attack, too. The diamonds lacked any close-range combat abilities, so they were cut down, and the spades, who had headed for cover, were being swarmed—and not just by homunculi. A magical girl with a trident was attacking the Shufflins, her face twisted into a demonic expression. The speed with which she wielded her weapon would rival the upper-numbered spades. She might appear frantic, but her movements were those of a trained soldier, and she acted rationally. Her footwork and agility were also exceptional. Throwing noncombat-type Shufflins at an opponent like her would only be a waste. And taking the enemy's magic into consideration, you'd need a large number of combat-type Shufflins. But the black shadows were throwing a wrench in Hamuel's manpower; the formation grew disordered, and the Shufflins were getting destroyed at a steady rate.

Hamuel clicked her tongue. Bitter feelings welled up from deep in her throat. Were these enemy reinforcements, or had Snow White's party been a decoy to begin with? It was even possible she had received a false tip, and that Sachiko's running away from home had been staged. The situation was about as bad as it could get. In order to nudge this disaster even a little closer to something positive, she would cut losses. If she didn't lose Shufflins here, she could still recover.

"Mission failed. Prioritize withdrawal."

Saying just that into her wireless radio, she inhaled a lungful of air. Right before the homunculi were about to attack Hamuel from

all six sides, she yelled into her wireless radio at the top of her lungs. Her target was not the Shufflins. It was the six homunculi about to attack her.

Shaken by the sudden loud sound in their heads, the homunculi swayed as if they were in pain, and Hamuel took advantage of that moment to get away from the shadows, flying away from the amusement park. She would always politely beg leave from any brawl. And to that extent, she was pretty confident in her ability to flee quickly.

◇ Sorami Nakano

Everyone was confused, even Sorami. They had been attacked by card soldiers, then came under fire from birdlime projectiles. As they ran and dodged the assault, the girls were gradually herded into a corner of the park, where they were ambushed. Uluru had yelled, “If you don’t close your eyes and get down, you’ll die!” which hadn’t worked at all. Finally, right when Sorami had thought they were goners, help had arrived. Black square-winged demons attacked the card soldiers, and in a stunning turn of events, the soldiers ran off to escape. Sorami and company had made a dash for an opening in the circle of enemies around them and headed for the back gate of the park.

“Your allies, Snow?” asked Sorami.

“We don’t know anything about this, pon.”

“So then maybe Lady Puk saved us?”

“She never said anything to us about that, either,” said Uluru.

This was completely different from when they’d captured the three card soldiers. Sorami didn’t even have the time to be anxious. If they stopped, they would die. She just kept running, using walls as cover and the playground as a shield, hiding in Snow White’s shadow—running, racing, flying, fleeing.

Training had been a boring hassle, and Sorami had wondered why they ever did something like that. She’d skip out whenever she could, which made Uluru get mad at her. Now that this was happening, for the first time, Sorami understood the point of marathons and sprinting. They had been training hard so they could do it right when it was time for the real thing.

She immediately understood what the demons were after—after

all, they attacked not just the card soldiers, but Sorami's group, too. Uluru blocked an attack with her gun stock while Sorami kicked, but the enemy dodged. Snow White sliced the black demon in two, and it fell to the ground.

"It seems they're also after Sachiko," said Snow White.

"For real? Goddamn," Sorami replied casually, but privately she was about ready to cry. She felt like she wanted to claw at someone and demand to know why this was happening. She wanted to yell and weep, but the group had to keep moving.

This was just enemy force A and enemy force B clashing. Was there another force trying to interfere with the ceremony besides the Osk Faction, or was there a split within the Osk Faction? There was no way for those under attack to know. All they could do now was take advantage of the confusion and run away.

Fighting off the demons, the card soldiers bunched into groups, attempting to withdraw. The clusters of demons focused their attacks on the card soldiers, too. Following Fal's radar and Snow White's instructions, with their backs to a wall, the party moved to where there were no magical girls, then from where the wall ended, they ran at full speed.

"Two magical girls detected coming toward us from the east side, pon! Those are the only enemies detected, pon!"

"Hey, pon-pon bastard! Which side is the east side?!"

"Who are you calling a pon-pon bastard, pon?! Ahead, then right, pon! Toward the lost-child department!"

The two magical girls emerged kicking through the wall of the lost-child department, and they crashed straight into them, hard. They were not card soldiers. They also weren't the black shadows. It was a magical girl with a hat like a scholar, wearing a white coat, and another one who was all in black. Sorami felt like she'd seen the black one somewhere before.

The right hand of the magical girl in black tangled up, bending its fingers in a complex way as if she had no joints, warping with flexibility. She raised her twisted-up right hand to the sunlight, and the shadow cast by her hand howled loudly over the concrete, attacking Uluru.

But it hadn't turned three-dimensional. It still looked like a shadow projected onto a flat surface. Still, who knew what would happen if it attacked? You never knew what to expect when it came to a magical girl's powers.

Uluru leaped backward to evade, and the shadow's fangs bit into the concrete. Had she failed to dodge, her foot would have gotten crunched. Sorami trembled with secondhand terror.

Snow White swung her *naginata*, slicing at the all-black magical girl who ducked, then backed away as she made a shadow with her left hand. Just like with her right, she created a beast. The left-hand beast faced Snow White, and Snow White hopped to evade its snapping maw.

It seemed the shadow beasts could not emerge from the surfaces they were projected on, like floors and walls. It was possible to temporarily avoid them by jumping. But they moved incredibly fast, and you couldn't stay airborne forever. The three of them wound up constantly facing attacks from below, and both evading and countering were difficult. Snow White and Uluru were both struggling.

The magical girl in black never looked away from Snow White as she instructed the one in the white coat, "Micchan, you handle her."

"Roger."

Unlike Snow White and Uluru, Sorami didn't have a weapon of her own. She spread her palms and lowered her stance, readying herself to dodge whatever came. She tried to calm her breathing, but it wouldn't settle.

The scholar-style magical girl had a stack of paper in her right hand—specifically, old newspapers. Sorami could see the lost-child department through the hole in the wall the magical-girl pair had opened. Inside were piles of cardboard boxes; the paper had probably been used as packing material or some kind of padding.

The magical girl swung down her scrunched-up newspaper at Sorami. "*Choukan* [morning newspaper] to *chouken* [longsword]."

Hair scattered all around. The elastic that had tied Sorami's hair was cut, and Sorami's long hair fanned out. She wasn't bleeding. She wasn't in pain, either. She'd managed to barely evade it—probably. Just like her training. She'd managed to move precisely like she'd been trained. Sorami had been practicing for the sake of a moment like this. She still couldn't settle her breathing.

Suddenly, the scholar-style magical girl was holding a sword. It was a plain, single-edged sword. It wasn't a newspaper. The moment she'd uttered the spell, the newspaper she'd been holding had transformed into a sword.

◇ Princess Deluge

The Demon Wings were Disrupters…demons that had been created to support artificial magical girls. They featured various options, such as remote control and sensory sharing. Deluge was instantly aware of any information gathered for her by the Demon Wings she'd released in W City.

The moment she had learned there were card soldiers present, Deluge acted without a thought. One who had been made to die in an accident was alive—and whoever was controlling Shufflin, they had to be from the Osk Faction. And if the Osk Faction was going all-out, odds were high that Premium Sachiko was there.

Up until her arrival, Deluge had been envisioning how she would fight, how she would act. Seeing those card soldiers had instantly blown all that away, filling up the inside of Deluge's mind with something else. Even she didn't know if it was anger or joy.

Deluge ordered the two Demon Wings that carried her through the air to drop her from fifty feet above ground level, and the moment she landed on the roof of the adventure playground, she hit one card soldier with her trident and swept the feet out from under another. While dancing around the gun barrels pointed toward her, she thrust over and over, stabbing at the Shufflin's torso.

The sensation was off. It felt like some kind of hard, thick rubber was buried in her costume. Deluge poured magic power into the trident as she stabbed, freezing the diamond soldier from the inside before she flung her to the roof, smashing her to pieces. She fired arrows of ice at the first card soldier, who'd fallen off the roof, and the second, who'd been knocked down by Deluge's sweep. It seemed they had something fitted around their torsos, so she aimed for their heads.

The card soldiers all around turned to Deluge, but they were too slow. Even accounting for Deluge's enhanced reflexes from the new drug she'd stolen from the research facility, they weren't quick enough to react. Only after three of their allied units were hit hard did they finally turn their attention to her. Deluge didn't know why, but it seemed their hearing had been blocked.

The Demon Wings started attacking the card soldiers together. Deluge jumped down from the roof, and in passing, she sliced one spade's neck, knocking it down with a roundhouse kick. At the

same moment the spade collapsed, Deluge set her foot on her neck and broke it with a stomp. As she did, she pulled a tablet from a pocket and swallowed it.

"Luxury Mode: On."

She instantly froze the adhesive masses that came flying in from all four directions, shattering them to pieces. Cutting through the fine, glittering beads of ice that sprinkled around her, Deluge ran. She cut down a club card soldier, bat and all, and with her ice arrows, she stabbed a diamond who'd been pointing a gun at her between the eyes, in the throat, and in the right eye.

The card soldiers gradually shifted their formation, and five intact soldiers came forward to fill the holes, trying to fight off the Demon Wings. Deluge went right for them.

One card soldier stopped her first strike, then forcefully knocked her second aside. A shock ran through Deluge's arms. After nearly dropping her trident, she gripped it tighter. That card soldier had stepped ahead of the others. It was as if she were defending her allies. Her number was ace, and her suit was spade.

Deluge howled. She roared like a beast, from deep in her gut in an endless stream. The last time she'd confronted the Ace of Spades, she'd been afraid. But now, she felt joy and anger. She fired ice arrows from six different directions simultaneously to strike at the same time.

With one swing of its lance, the card soldier sliced away all six arrows of ice at once. Her eyes were locked on Deluge, and she didn't even look at the arrows. Deluge thrust in with her trident, but it was struck aside with a hand once again, and she lost her balance.

Deluge had been holding her trident firmly with both hands, but the Ace of Spades had struck it aside with one hand. She could pull that off while simultaneously dealing with the ice arrows.

Deluge let her stagger take her down to one knee, inviting the Ace of Spades to attack. But the Ace of Spades made no move to strike. She was prioritizing buying time for her allies to get away safely.

—Defending allies? You? You would do such a thing?

Quake had sacrificed herself and been beheaded in order to protect Tempest. She had died without ever knowing that Tempest, who had cried and wailed while begging for mercy, would also have her head cut off. If Quake had known, what would she have

said? What would she have thought?

The arrows of ice that circled around Deluge increased in number and accelerated as well, screeching as they spun around her.

—If you'll defend your allies…

From her position on one knee on the concrete, she raised her trident. "I'll kill you!"

The Ace dodged her rising attack and struck down her first arrow of ice. The second and third arrows veered away from their target and hit the ground, and Deluge moved around the Ace, circling to the right as she swung her trident, but the Ace evaded this, too, and kicked her in the gut. The possessions on her person scattering everywhere, Deluge was thrown back, firing off ice arrows as the Ace leaped after her, but all her arrows were knocked down.

Deluge licked the blood that spilled from the corners of her mouth. It tasted like metal.

From her position lying on the ground, using her right hand as a pivot, she rapid-fire kicked at the Ace's ankles. The handle of the Ace's spear blocked them heavily, and pain shot through her legs. Her bones creaked. Deluge clenched her teeth. She flung out her ice arrows; they were struck down. She attacked with her trident, it was knocked aside.

In a flash, three of the Demon Wings that came flying in from above were sliced open with the Ace's spear. The Ace's return swing cut three more and sent them flying—or more like blasted them to bits.

Deluge sent even more Demon Wings to attack while she took a handful of tablets in her hand, stuffed them in her mouth, and crunched them all up.

"Luxury Mode: Burst."

It was as if overflowing power were pushing at her back. Her body moved forward on its own. Energy spilled out from her Princess Jewel as its sparkling blue light shone over the black-and-white spades.

A thrust.

Her strike was divinely fast, working in coordination with the Demon Wings' attack, picking a moment that would absolutely not miss as she thrust forward to tear up the Ace—or so it seemed for a second. She had pierced the Ace's costume but missed her body. No

—she had been made to miss.

After that full-force thrust of her trident, before Deluge could move, the Ace kicked. Deluge guarded with her right arm, but she was thrown backward. She heard a nasty sound coming from her arm. It was broken.

While rolling over the concrete, she spurred on the Demon Wings and shot out ice arrows.

—Am I still not strong enough?

Deluge asked herself and answered that no, that was not true. Back then, other magical girls had been fighting with her: Snow White, Filru, Marika Fukuroi, Styler Mimi, and Princess Inferno. Now Deluge was the only magical girl here. But despite that, she could fight.

Deluge's blade could now reach the Ace's neck.

Deluge got up and backed away. The Ace, having destroyed five Demon Wings in the blink of an eye, came forward. The Ace's toe bumped the magical phone Deluge had dropped a moment ago.

There was no fear, not like before. Neither did battle bring her elation, like Marika Fukuroi. All she felt was the deep urge to kill.

She raised her trident in her right hand, laying her left alongside its shaft. From this sniper-like stance, she did a one-handed thrust. Her stab at the Ace's face was knocked down by the Ace's spear, sending her trident to *thunk* into the mountain of possessions Deluge had dropped. Her magical phone bounced, its hanging cord cut off and flying away.

Deluge's right hand was numb. She gripped her trident with the left hand laid against its side. The Ace ignored her trident, stepping forward. It must have looked like the Ace could stab Deluge with her spear faster than Deluge could raise her weapon into the attack position again—and that was probably correct.

Deluge focused her magic on the point of the trident, thrust it into her pile of things, and pulled it up. Stuck at the end of the magically frozen trident was a ring-shaped object—the magic handcuffs. With the magic handcuff stuck to the end of her trident, she caught the Ace's leg as she was stepping forward and froze her in place.

Deluge had retrieved the magic handcuffs that had kept the armored magical girl—Armor Arlie—restrained. Tucked inside the pocket of the magical girl with the police motif had been a little key, and when Deluge had used it to open the cuffs, Armor Arlie

had been able to move again. But until the key had opened those cuffs, Armor Arlie had been completely immobilized, and no matter if Deluge stabbed or froze the cuffs, they had not gotten a single scratch.

By hooking the Ace's leg with the magic handcuffs that would bind whoever they captured, she'd stopped the Ace from moving. Deluge retracted the cold energy from her trident, releasing the handcuffs from its points. She pointed her weapon at the fallen Ace —

"Deluge!"

She suddenly looked up. Amid the card soldiers and Demon Wings scattered on the ground, there was Bluebell Candy, looking at her like she was on the verge of tears.

There were lots of things Deluge wanted to ask, like "*Why did you come here?*" or "*Why are you looking at me like that?*" But before any of those could emerge from her mouth as words, Princess Deluge let out a little laugh.

Deluge thrust at the Ace's throat with full force and slammed all her ice arrows into her face.

◇ Bluebell Candy

Bluebell dodged the birdlime, evaded a club swung at her from behind, yelping and shrieking as she skittered around, getting away from the card soldiers, and at the end of her flight was the Ace of Clubs. She ducked the Club's strike, rolled to avoid its follow-up attack, then fled as black wings came in to fill the spot she'd just occupied. Holding her hat down with her right hand as it started falling, she looked all around. The battle was chaos, a mess of enemies and allies jumbled together, and she had no idea where she was.

The Dark Cutie, Glassianne, and Micchan the Dictionary trio had gone off somewhere. Deluge had to be fighting, but Bluebell had no idea where she was.

The roller slide had collapsed, and the cloud of dust in its wake reached all the way to Bluebell. She put her hand over her mouth and coughed, then bent far backward to avoid the spear thrust at her.

“Deluge! Deluge!” she yelled loudly, but there was no reply. Bluebell kept calling as she ran, evading enemy attacks as she approached the central area of the amusement park. There, she found Deluge.

“Deluge!”

Their eyes met. Deluge grimaced, but it also looked like she was smiling.

Deluge drove her trident into the throat of a card soldier, filling her face with arrows of ice. Blood fountained up, making Bluebell feel faint, but she bit her lip. The pain helped her cling to consciousness. If she passed out now, she couldn’t protect Deluge.

Deluge’s hand slid off her trident, and the gem in her tiara gradually faded. Deluge crumpled to the ground, and the giant handcuffs clanked, bouncing off the concrete. Impaled in the throat, face showered with arrows, the card soldier shuddered, then slowly raised her spear.

Before that spear could swing down, Bluebell shoved her aside. Thrown to the ground by Bluebell’s running shove, the card soldier tried to stand up with stilted movements, like a broken machine, but halfway up she stopped, hands sliding, and her body pulsed. Starting from the site of the pulse, her body slowly crumbled away and vanished.

Bluebell picked up the trident and the handcuffs and heaved Deluge over her shoulder. This wasn’t the time for fear. She ran with everything she had.

“Protect Deluge!” she yelled back at the circling Demon Wings, then started running. The number of card soldiers was greatly diminished.

◇ **Sorami Nakano**

Sword still in her right hand, the enemy slowly opened her left, which was dirtied with mud. "*Doro* [mud] to *dosu* [dagger]."

The enemy produced a dagger from where the mud once was. She adopted a sideways stance with the dagger held in front. The one-handed sword held high in her right hand swayed.

From which angle would she attack? How would she attack?

The one-handed sword thrust forward with no warning, and Sorami barely managed to avoid it. If she hadn't focused everything on dodging, she'd have gotten hit. Sorami tried stepping as the sword withdrew, but the dagger twitched, and Sorami hastily stepped back.

Scary. Scary. Scary. But she could move. She clenched her palms, then opened them. She let go of the breath she'd been holding all at once, then inhaled again. This was the same as training. This was training so that she could move the same way again.

Lowering her stance, she looked her opponent in the face.

Uluru had her hands full fighting the shadow beast. Snow White and the magical girl in black were holding position as they exchanged a storm of blows. Sorami heard metal clashing as sparks scattered.

The gate, parking lot, iron railing, public bathroom, map sign, streetlights, stairs, telephone booth, wilted grass, a hut that looked like a closet—checking everything around them in a single glance, Sorami evaded the sword with a backstep.

She could move. Her training was moving her.

She meant to drop attacking and focus entirely on evasion, but she was only barely dodging. The enemy was taking deeper steps in than she had anticipated. In other words, the enemy had made an accurate measure of her ability.

Rolling backward, Sorami tossed her magical phone, the controller-shaped backpack that was a part of her costume, just anything she had at hand, backing away and ready to run, continuing to evade any way she could.

"*Ken* [sword] to *kon* [club]."

The one-handed sword turned into a long wooden club that drove toward Sorami. She retreated in an attempt to evade; it had greater reach than the sword and struck her chest.

Though Sorami was able to reduce the impact a bit, since she was off-balance, she couldn't stay on her feet. It knocked her back,

sending her flying into the storage hut to smash through the window and land inside.

The cardboard boxes piled inside the hut softened the impact, flying everywhere. She ran her right hand along her chest. It felt hot. She probably had a crack in her breastbone, at the very least.

Sensing hostility, Sorami jerked her head to the right. A dagger passed through the spot where her head had been a fraction of a second earlier to thud into the wall before her eyes.

She heard feet crunching on the broken window glass behind her. Someone had come into the hut—the enemy. The enemy had entered through the window Sorami had smashed through. In the whirling dust, the silhouette took form, and the scholar-style magical girl emerged. This magical girl who looked like she'd act as a commentator on an educational show was now looking like a creature from a monster movie.

Sorami would move like she had during her training. She could do it. That was what she told herself. It was okay to be scared. Even if she was frightened, terrified, she just had to move her body. That was what she'd trained for. She drew in a breath, then exhaled. Drew in a breath, then exhaled. It was dusty and smelled of mold. But still, she inhaled, exhaled, and then drew in a big breath.

The hut was small on the inside. It was stacked up with cardboard boxes even though it hadn't been big to begin with. If you included on top of those boxes as part of the range they could move in, it was no more than thirty square feet at most. There were ten feet between her and the enemy, and behind Sorami was a wall. She had nowhere to run.

Concentrate, she ordered herself. *If you don't concentrate, you'll die.*

From a low stance, Sorami made a grab at the enemy. A tackle—or she made it look like one before sharply changing direction and heading for the window. The moment she moved, her head violently jerked back. The enemy had stepped on her long hair, which had trailed over the ground when she'd lowered her stance.

A heartbeat later, the floorboards cracked. The enemy's right foot broke through the floor and she lost balance, and Sorami took advantage of that opportunity to use both hands to sweep the enemy's right leg out from under her.

The enemy rolled and knocked over a bucket. The line-making powder inside it was tossed into the air, filling the inside of the

little hut with white. The enemy was coughing. By the time the enemy fell, Sorami had already been holding her breath.

Sorami's magic allowed her to know the contents of something before opening it. The moment she'd hit the window of the locked hut, she'd known all that was inside—where the floor was weak, what was in that bucket; and she'd acted based on her knowledge of all that information.

She'd also lowered her stance because she'd expected the enemy to attack low and stomp through the floor. Things had worked out as she'd planned.

The hut was not entirely enclosed. The window both of them had come in through was broken, and there had been light shining through the gaps in the door and the little holes in the walls to begin with. With Sorami's magic, the more strictly her target was sealed, the more precise the information she would gain. Of course, even with a loose seal, it wasn't as if she couldn't see anything. Often enough, a vague understanding was enough. If she simply wanted to run away, this would be enough.

Right now, she could run away. But she wouldn't.

Just getting out of here wouldn't be hard. But after Sorami fled, this enemy would probably attack Uluru and Snow White. If that happened, that would put the both of them in danger.

Sorami would defeat this enemy. That was her job—she made that decision.

Sorami dumped everything out of the cardboard boxes inside the hut. Using the packing tape that had been sealing it, she stuck a cardboard box to the window, and in the moment where the enemy faltered, she packed shredded cardboard into the holes in the walls.

Now all at once, this hut was more tightly sealed. Even if Sorami was inside a space, it still counted as "closed."

Her information was refreshed. Sorami learned of everything in the hut—things, places, the enemy, her condition, her movements, everything was communicated to Sorami in real time.

The enemy yanked her dagger out from the wall. Holding it in a reverse grip, she came at Sorami. She was shuffling her feet a little. She had to be thinking she'd go for a close-range fight because of the poor visibility, which was just what Sorami wanted.

Sorami grabbed the enemy's right wrist in both her hands. It was the hand that held the dagger.

When Sorami caught her wrist, the enemy reflexively tried to

pull out of her grip. The movements of the opponent's muscles and her breathing were transmitted to Sorami clearly. Matching the enemy's backward pull, Sorami pushed the enemy's right wrist, putting her off-balance. To throw the enemy down, she spun the enemy around with her wrist at the center point, maintaining her grip on the wrist.

The enemy was thrown beautifully to the ground, then she tried to scramble to her feet again. Sorami went along with the enemy's movements again, this time pulling on her wrist instead. The enemy lost her balance. Throw. Push, pull. Pull, twist, and throw again. When the enemy tried to stand up, Sorami twisted her wrist, pulled, and threw her, and when she tried to break her fall, Sorami flung her down.

The enemy yelled, "*Yaiba* [blade] to *yaito* [mugwort]!"

She realized what was happening. The dagger in the enemy's hand transformed into a lump of mugwort. It was a strange magic, but that didn't change what Sorami had to do. Everything in the hut was clear to her. She understood how the enemy moved. She threw her to the ground. She wasn't slamming her to damage her. She was just putting her on the floor.

"*Yaito* [mugwort] to *raito* [light]!"

Sorami was reading every single twitch of the enemy's body. Her concentration was refined to a level it had never reached before. It was unusual for her to get like this, not even once in twenty training sessions.

The enemy's right hand got heavy. The enemy switched on a searchlight about thirty inches in diameter, too big for a handheld type, the beam pointing away from Sorami's face. The enemy wrenched around her upper body to throw the light. The light broke through the cardboard boxes that covered the window and flew out of the hut.

It wasn't bad as a method of ripping through the cardboard boxes in order to break the seal on the room, but it was too late. The motion had been too forced, and it had ruined her stance. Sorami turned over the enemy's wrist, extended the elbow joint to lock it, and put her weight on it. She could feel the dull sound of bones breaking through her body.

When Sorami locked her shoulder, too, putting her weight into it, she could hear Snow White yelling something. By the time she noticed the hut creaking, it was all falling down.

The roof came down. The walls collapsed. The window glass was smashed, the cardboard boxes went flying, and the line-marking powder was blown in the wind. The information that had been filling Sorami all vanished. The wreckage of the hut rained down in pieces.

She tried to stand up but fell over. She looked down. Her right ankle was missing. Blood was spewing. Her concentration was fading. Maddening pain literally pierced through Sorami's ankle.

The hut was no longer something that could be called a hut. The ceiling and walls had been destroyed, and all that remained was the floor. Sorami was confused. She didn't understand what had happened. There was no information. She looked outside. A long, long shadow extended from the place where the magical girl in black was illuminated by the light—*Ohhh, so that's it.* It made sense.

A shadow beast had destroyed the hut. The shadow that had been thrown by the light of the searchlight had grown and lengthened until its attack had reached Sorami, fighting farther away. The scholar-style magical girl kicked Sorami and dashed out from the ruins of the hut, and in less than the time it took to blink, the black beast had crushed Sorami in its jaws. The sound of shattering bones and crushing flesh followed, and Uluru's scream capped it off at the end.

◇ Micchan the Dictionary

The enemy was stronger than she had thought. She moved well and was visually attentive; she never once lost her cool, even when cornered. Though their vision should have been clouded, whatever magic she used, she'd thrown and locked Micchan as she pleased. She wasn't someone Micchan could hold back with, and Micchan couldn't blame Dark Cutie for cleanly finishing her off. But still, even if she was an enemy, racking up casualties made Micchan slightly ill.

At first, Micchan thought she was a comparatively easy opponent, but that had been carelessness on Micchan's part. She had sensed the girl wasn't experienced, but there was no way a magical girl involved in a conflict among the Three Sages would be weak. Getting to her feet without using her left arm, Micchan

checked on things.

While exchanging blows with Snow White, Dark Cutie had also restrained a second opponent as she'd used Micchan's light to enlarge her shadow beast and devour the enemy. Micchan was impressed she could pull all that off alone and was sincerely glad they were on the same side.

It seemed there was no more work for Micchan to do. The giant beast that had been created by Micchan's light and Dark Cutie's shadow puppet spat out the body of the magical girl and opened its jaws wide to crunch its next opponent.

Then there was the *thunk* of some kind of impact, and the beast's form wavered. The light faded and vanished.

Micchan looked toward the light.

"…A shuriken?"

A shuriken was buried in the light. It was now wrecked and useless.

"*Kon* [club] to *kote* [glove]! *Kote* [glove] to *tate* [shield]!" Micchan slid in to pick up the club, going through a gauntlet to make a big shield and hide in its shadow. The metal shield repelled the objects that came flying in. Looking at the objects lying there, she saw they were shuriken and kunai.

Micchan yelled into her communicator, "Anne! There's someone throwing shuriken and kunai! Where are they coming from?!"

On the other end of the communicator, Glassianne was silent for a while before replying hastily and with irritation, "Looks like they're super far away. It's beyond the range of my glasses." Basically, there was nothing they could do about it from their end.

As she exchanged blows with Snow White, Dark Cutie backed away. She tried to hide in the shadow of a pillar to tide out the shuriken, but Snow White sliced down the pillar with her *naginata*. Dark Cutie knocked down the shuriken and tried to evade Snow White's attack, but the strike's motion changed from parallel to perpendicular, cutting a light gash on her upper arm. When Snow White followed up with another attack, Dark Cutie created a beast shadow puppet to hold Snow White back and stall her advance while Dark Cutie put some distance between them. But the shuriken didn't stop coming. Whether they tried to run or jump, the projectiles would follow their targets with unnatural trajectories.

Even with Dark Cutie and Micchan the Dictionary's athletic abilities, it would be highly challenging to ignore these shuriken

and attack.

Hiding behind her big shield, Micchan picked up a scrap of concrete and used both hands to grind it down and squeeze it round, making a little ball.

"*Shoukyuu* [globule] to *Shoujuu* [rifle]."

So she just had to have a way to attack from hiding behind this shield without entering in the rain of shuriken. Raising the Kalashnikov rifle she'd made with her magic, Micchan fixed her aim at Snow White. She was fully occupied with Dark Cutie. Even if she did notice Micchan, whether she could handle her was another matter. She put her finger on the trigger, but the moment she was about to squeeze, someone yelled out.

"You bastards!"

Micchan shifted her aim. The magical girl in the coat holding a gun was trembling. Not in fear. You could tell, looking at her expression. She was trembling with rage.

Then that would make her easy to hit. Micchan pulled the tr—

"You bastards! Now Uluru's gonna blow up and take you all down, too!"

A chill ran up Micchan's spine, like the gentle touch of a corpse. She trembled with the certainty that she was going to die. The "unarmed assassin," Micchan the Dictionary, who went to the battlefield with nothing and returned from the battlefield with nothing, was terrified like a cowardly child who'd just been told a ghost story.

At this rate, they were all going down. That magical girl planned to die in a big explosion so she could make Micchan and Dark Cutie die with her. Micchan abandoned her shield and fled. She prayed for her escape and that Dark Cute would get away, too.

◇ Snow White

They somehow managed to get away. It was lucky they'd even escaped at all.

She asked herself if she'd underestimated them and answered to herself that she had not.

The enemy was simply too skilled. Since they'd encountered the Shufflins in the park, it was natural to assume they were being watched. Even for a magical girl, tailing Snow White from outside

the range of Fal's radar would be extremely difficult. With magic, it wasn't impossible, but Snow White thought most likely they were being watched from high in the sky. The Shufflins in the amusement park had moved as if unified, like a single creature. Though the Shufflins as a whole were a single magical girl, they couldn't share information. Someone had been observing them all to give instructions.

And the Shufflins were not their only enemy. That one girl had been none other than the one and only Dark Cutie.

She was the magical-girl villain who had appeared in the anime *Cutie Healer Galaxy*. Born from dark matter that drifted through the universe, she was the vanguard of the Space Chaos, which planned the destruction of the universe, and the protagonists Cutie Altair and Cutie Vega had waged a fierce battle against her. At the end, she'd disappeared while swearing revenge against the heroines, an anomaly for villains in the *Cutie Healer* series, where villains were usually destroyed, or reformed, or reformed then destroyed. Reception to this ending was said to have been mixed.

That was who had attacked them.

Dark Cutie probably had flexible joints—the sort of flexibility where she could reverse the index finger of her right hand all the way to touch the back of the same hand with her fingertip, all without using her left hand. She would tangle up her hands and hold them up to the light of the sun to make shadow puppets. Her scissors made from shadow had severed an iron pillar, and her wolf made from shadow had crunched into concrete.

The beasts were the problem. The weapon-type of shadows weren't as bad. Since Snow White could hear the voice of Dark Cutie's heart, Snow White could deal with any weapons she wielded, but the beasts created from shadow had no inner voice. They didn't feel or think anything, attacking Snow White as automatically operated battle machines.

Dark Cutie was clearly superior to Snow White when it came to physical abilities and battle technique. Even though the shadow beast wasn't as strong as her, Snow White couldn't hear their thoughts. Dark Cutie had kept out of Snow White's range, making use of her reach with repeated slices, while she left the main offensive role to the beast. If she was fighting like this, then she knew all about Snow White's magic. Snow White blocked the shadow scissors, avoided the beast's fangs, blocked a kick, and

dodged the beast's claws, never with the space to attack. Dark Cutie was fighting in a way that would steadily wear her down.

At this rate, eventually, she was going to lose. The unexpected backup was what changed things. In the middle of the fight, projectiles suddenly started flying toward them, attacking the black beasts and Dark Cutie. The black beasts had wailed while Dark Cutie had faltered.

But it wasn't as if Snow White could shift to attack now. When she saw what was flying toward them, she was terribly rattled. Coming for them were shuriken and kunai.

Those shuriken and kunai were familiar. They were the weapons used by the missing magical girl Snow White was looking for. She'd gone missing after getting involved in an incident in another city, and even after exploring every corner of that place, Snow White had never even been able to find a body.

If Snow White hadn't been so preoccupied, she probably would have heard the thoughts of whatever magical girl Sorami had been fighting, anticipated what she would do, and warned Sorami. She would probably have noticed that these two enemy magical girls, unlike the Shufflins, didn't have earplugs, and would have had Uluru tell a lie earlier. Rattled by the shuriken and swept along in the chaos, Snow White had been agitated during the fight, and as a result, though they'd managed to drive off the enemy, Sorami had lost her life.

They picked places you couldn't see from the sky to travel through: back alleys, tunnels, culverts, arcades, underneath overpasses. Right now, they were hiding underneath a tiny bridge that swayed with every passing car. The girls huddled together in the tall grasses and held their breath.

Uluru set her tightly clenched fists on her knees as her shoulders trembled.

Sachiko had her arms folded over her lap, head laid on top, and she wasn't moving.

Snow White tossed the kunai she'd been fiddling with into her bag.

In a battle between magical girls, the state of the heart was most important of all. But sometimes, you had to act, even if you were upset. Even if you were crying, even if you were angry, even if you were frightened and trembling, you had to act, or you wouldn't

resolve anything. Even if she were to feel responsible and think, *Because of me, someone got hurt; because of my mistake, someone got killed* and shut herself away, that wasn't going to bring back the lives lost.

The sensation of the kunai remained in her hands. She opened her palms, clenched them, opened, clenched tight, and opened them again. She smacked her cheeks, and Uluru and Sachiko raised their heads.

"Uluru, please contact Lady Puk Puck," said Snow White. "Could you send her a message saying something like, '*We've found Premium Sachiko. We want to return to the estate, but we're being targeted not only by the Osk Faction but by another force. Requesting backup*.'"

"Yeah…Uluru can do that."

"I…" Premium Sachiko had been crying this whole time, so her voice was hoarse. "I don't want to go back."

Uluru tried to stand up, but Snow White held her shoulders, restraining her. Sachiko's head jerked up violently, and she shuffled on her bottom away from Uluru, but Uluru pushed Snow White aside and approached Sachiko, grabbing her by the collar. "You idiot, Sachiko! You big stupid idiot! You're still talking like that?!"

"But, but…!"

"Both of you, please lower your voices."

"Why run away?! How could you run?! You can be the hero, here!"

"But…!"

"Both of you, lower your voices."

"Do you think you were gonna get sacrificed live in this ceremony?! Do you honestly think Lady Puk Puck would make you do something like that?! You're not allowed to say you don't understand just how kind she is!"

"I know! I know Lady Puk is kind!"

"Both of you, quiet."

"So then don't run away! Because of… Because of you…"

Snow White stood, quietly approached the two of them, and pulled the sleeve of Uluru's coat. Uluru looked at Snow White with a startled expression, bit her lip, and yanked her sleeve away in annoyance.

Snow White knew what Uluru had been about to say. Uluru had been about to say, "*Sorami died because of you*." At the very least,

that wasn't something she should say now. Uluru knew that, too. But still, sometimes words would just spill out.

Sachiko put her hand to her forehead and sighed. "I know Lady Puk is kind. She's been kind to me, too."

"That's right." Uluru nodded. "Lady Puk Puck is kind. So you don't need to worry."

"That's not what I was worrying about."

"Then why did you run away?!"

"I don't want to kill anyone…"

"What?! Who do you think would make you kill someone?!"

"If my magic gets used in the ceremony, someone has to die. If I use my magic, someone is certain to die. You know that, too, sis."

Uluru sighed deeply. She tried to rise, but Snow White pushed her shoulders down. So now instead, Uluru didn't leap to her feet but switched places with Snow White to move beside Sachiko, sit down, and put her arms around her shoulders. Sachiko trembled, but Uluru didn't pay that any mind and said, "You think Lady Puk Puck would completely ignore what you want and force you to kill someone in the ceremony…?" With a bright smile, Uluru looked at Sachiko, then Snow White, and then finally, she snorted *Hmph*. "Of course she'd never do that. Listen, part of Lady Puk Puck's kindness to us is that she won't make us do things like kill. And particularly not you, Sachiko. You've been spoiled. Do you know how many times Uluru has thought about giving you a whack for being so spoiled? Have some self-awareness, come on!"

"But…!"

"Both of you, enough." Snow White cut between the two of them and tried to pull them apart, but they still wouldn't separate, so Snow White used all the strength she had to gradually pry them apart. "We won't be able to stay hidden at this rate. There are two different groups after you, Sachiko. We have to find someplace safe first."

Uluru nodded as if to say, "*You're right.*" "Uluru will request rescue from Lady Puk Puck. Though it's embarrassing…well, there's no helping it. Right, Sachiko? You get where the safest place to be right now is, right? For now, let's just go back."

◇ **Princess Deluge**

When Deluge opened her eyes, she was gazing up at a really cheap-looking ceiling that had bits of peeled-off wallpaper stuck all over it. Bluebell was peering at her face, and Deluge realized her head was pillowed in Bluebell's lap.

She scrambled to try to get up but felt a spasm in her back and scowled.

"Don't force yourself, Deluge," said Bluebell. "You were passed out all this time, you know."

Without replying, Deluge brushed off her hands and stood. Dark Cutie, Micchan the Dictionary, and Glassianne were all silent, mouths hanging open slightly as they looked over at her. Deluge raised her right hand, saying, "I'm all right," and then as if a dam had broken, the trio started to discuss. It seemed they were talking about the battle in the amusement park and what would happen now.

Right. We'd been fighting in the amusement park. Deluge shook. She'd fought and defeated the Ace of Spades. She stared at her right palm. It was like she could still feel it. Licking her lower lip, she bit it hard and was about to stand when Bluebell stopped her.

"Don't be so reckless! You have to rest!"

Deluge didn't reply, brushing Bluebell's hand away. She understood this was reckless. But she had to do it anyway.

Deluge glanced over at the three in discussion. The name "Snow White" caught her ears.

"Snow White?" She reacted without thinking.

"Oh, so you know her, too, Miss Deluge?" said Micchan. "She's famous, after all."

Snow White was here.

One of the three magical girls Glassianne had described looked very much like Snow White. Glassianne also told her that Dark Cutie and Micchan the Dictionary had also acknowledged she was definitely the Magical-Girl Hunter they'd all heard rumors about.

As the trio discussed how they'd deal with the Magical-Girl Hunter, Deluge was thinking about something else.

Princess Deluge had never thought of the magical girl known as Snow White as her enemy.

Though they should have been enemies when they'd met, the first time Deluge had seen her, she hadn't felt like Snow White was her foe. Unlike the others, Snow White had spoken to them to avoid

fighting. Deluge figured she must have done it because with her magic to hear the thoughts of people in trouble, she'd discovered they didn't have to fight the Pure Elements.

After that, when they had all fought with the Shufflins Grim Heart commanded, Snow White had been their most reliable ally. Her directions were precise, she'd come up with strategies, and she had boldly fought the Ace of Spades, an enemy that could practically break your spirit at a glance. Seeing that had won Deluge over, enabling her to fight to the end.

The other major thing may have been that, unlike the other new magical girls she'd met then, whose identities she had no clue about, Deluge had learned that Snow White was Inferno's friend. Though Marika Fukuroi, for example, had stepped forward to fight more boldly—or violently, rather—than anyone else, and the fruit she'd given Deluge and Inferno had helped them a lot when their drugs had been about to run out, she wasn't exactly someone Deluge had ever felt close to. Marika hadn't really felt like someone she could count on. She'd more often just thought she was scary, or wondered, *Um, is she okay?*

Snow White had an identity, and Deluge had found out she was originally human. Deluge figured maybe she was prone to believe that any friend of Inferno's was on the up-and-up because of who Inferno was as a person.

Besides, talking to a mascot about the problems you had to deal with fit with the idea of magical girls Deluge was familiar with. It was always the good magical girl who had a mascot and helped people in trouble. No matter if she was combat-focused or a mainly mundane sort of magical girl, if she had a mascot, that meant she was on the right side.

In one of the few magical-girl anime Nami Aoki had seen, *Magical Daisy*, the witty banter between the heroine, Daisy, and her mascot Palette had been a selling point. Nami hadn't thought about that sort of thing at the time, just smiled as she watched and thought, *They look like they're having fun.*

Even though that had only been a little over a month ago, it felt like a long-distant past.

Snow White was also known as the Magical-Girl Hunter. Deluge had heard she was called that because she went all over the place hunting bad magical girls. She remembered that Snow White herself

hadn't confirmed that fact and had looked a bit embarrassed about the title.

Deluge had been unable to be there for Inferno's last moments, but upon asking Bluebell, she'd been able to see the data. Right before her death, Inferno had made a request of Snow White. Saying, "If you're the Magical-Girl Hunter, then I want you to hunt those bad magical girls," Inferno had died.

Was Snow White still hunting bad magical girls? Right now, "bad magical girls" meant those who were attacking Premium Sachiko: Shufflin of the Osk Faction as well as Dark Cutie, Micchan the Dictionary, Glassianne, and Princess Deluge.

Snow White was with her mascot. Right now, Princess Deluge was with a bunch of demons.

Deluge was aware she was past the point of no return, and she was prepared. She didn't want to turn back now, and she would cut down anyone who tried to force her to turn back.

But still, when she thought of Snow White, it hurt. Her memories of Snow White always came in a set with Princess Inferno. Snow White had been a friend of Inferno's from middle school, and they'd fought the Shufflins together with Inferno, and she was the one who had been witness to Inferno's death and been entrusted with her dying wish.

Pressing a hand to her heart, Deluge smothered the impulse to scratch at it.

She pulled her medicine from its case and took one tablet. It still wasn't enough. Her heart ached. It hurt.

"Bluebell…," Deluge said, "please give me a candy."

"It's best not to have too many, Deluge."

"Just give me one."

Sucking on the candy lightened her heart a bit. It wasn't that this made it okay, but by using it together with her drugs, she could probably reduce her consumption of the latter.

◇ Glassianne

By the time they reconvened at an apartment building in a newly developing residential area, thirty minutes had passed since their battle in the amusement park.

With Deluge and her flock of demons, they'd managed to beat

back the card soldiers. That part had been according to plan. Great. What had not gone according to plan had been the events with Micchan the Dictionary and Dark Cutie. "*The enemy was stronger than anticipated, so we failed to capture her*" wouldn't even be a good excuse for a little kid. This was not great.

Even without the ranged support from the shuriken, the three enemies had been strong. The long-haired magical girl had thrown Micchan and dislocated her left arm. With a single remark, the one with the gun had driven Micchan and Dark Cutie to retreat. The Magical-Girl Hunter Snow White had managed to withstand Dark Cutie's attacks.

Glassianne, who'd been watching over the battle, had known one of the card soldiers was particularly powerful, but she had already been defeated by Deluge. It was a big deal to defeat that. Deluge was strong. Glassianne gained a bit of respect for her as a result.

There had been one magical girl who'd been giving orders to the card soldiers, but Deluge had also reported that she'd gotten away. That matter would require caution, but there was no point in being that wary over an opponent who would run away without even trying to fight.

So then the ones they had to worry about were Puk Puck's protégés and the Magical-Girl Hunter Snow White. After leaving the field of battle, the three of them had avoided large roads entirely, going from a back alley into a culvert, and there, Glassianne had lost sight of them. With Glassianne's magic, she could check any location she had been to before, but if it was someplace she had never seen, she'd either have to do a point-of-view shift or use her own legs to go there. The speed of a point-of-view shift was slower than using her legs, so it was difficult to chase a magical girl on the lam.

Though Micchan and Dark Cutie had managed to defeat one opponent with their teamwork, well, there was no doubting that the remaining two were also first-rate magical girls.

It hadn't gone the best it could have. But still, some parts had gone well.

They'd discovered Deluge's abilities were the real deal. They'd also discovered the winged demons could be used to counter the Osk Faction's Shufflin, which had its strength in numbers. And they'd also finished off the magical girl who had dislocated

Micchan's elbow, shaving down the enemy forces by one.

Deluge and Bluebell were one room over, arguing again. And since all the sliding screens had been taken away, not only could their voices be heard, but their expressions and gestures were also visible. But the trio forced themselves to avert their eyes and discussed their earlier fight instead.

"There was something a little strange about the way the Shufflins moved, huh?" said Micchan.

"You think?" replied Glassianne.

"You can tell if you look at the recordings, but they reacted slow. Even assuming us three and Miss Deluge were reacting fast, they were still too slow. I think, maybe, they had their ears plugged or something. That'd make the most sense to me."

"Their ears…?"

"That magical girl with the gun got us at the end, didn't she?"

Thinking normally, the declaration by the magical girl with the gun that she was going to blow herself up would be nothing more than a childish bluff, a lie.

A magical girl like Micchan should not have taken a statement like that seriously, but she'd been so convinced she was going to die when the girl blew herself up, she had chosen to retreat. Thinking about it after the fact, she realized there was no way that girl could have done something like that, but at the time, for some reason, she'd lost her head and believed it, and Micchan's flight had also made Dark Cutie decide that maintaining the line of battle was impossible, allowing the remaining two enemies to escape.

"Did you think she'd actually blow herself up, too, Leader?" asked Micchan.

"I did."

"And you still didn't immediately run away?"

"I thought if she was prepared to blow herself up to take the both of us down alone, that wouldn't be a bad ending for a villain. But if you're going to run, Micchan, then I will, too."

"If I could think like you do, Leader, I wouldn't have had to run, though…"

"If you were like our leader," said Glassianne, "we'd have died a long time ago."

"True." Micchan nodded.

"Anyway," Glassianne continued, "that's not our problem right now. This means if you hear what she says, you're made to believe

her. So then we can assume that's her magic, right?"

"Yeah."

"That's right."

"So then doesn't that sound like that's connected to how the card soldiers were moving awkwardly?"

"Yep, yep," Micchan agreed. "I can't say for sure, but I think their slight delay in reaction might've been 'cause they couldn't hear. Maybe they were wearing earplugs."

"Why would they do that?"

"Wouldn't it be because they knew about the magic to make you believe whatever she said? And then it'd make sense for them to wear earplugs to protect against that."

"Ohhh." Glassianne nodded. "Oh yeah, before we fought, didn't they have a skirmish in the park? Maybe they found out about that magic then, or maybe they had information beforehand we didn't, from documents or something. Actually, that's really plausible."

"Then we'll get earplugs, too. That magic is something you kinda can't ignore."

"But if we plug our ears, we can't use our communication devices anymore. And if I can't communicate information to you anymore, then there's no more point in my detecting enemies for you."

"Hold on just a minute there, please." Micchan pulled out a map of W City that she'd gotten from Pfle. "*Mappu* [map] to *macchi* [match]. *Macchi* [match] to *pacchi* [patch]. *Pacchi* [patch] to *panchi* [hole puncher]. *Panchi* [hole puncher] to *panko* [bread crumbs]. *Panko* [bread crumbs] to *hanko* [stamp]."

The map turned into a box of matches. She took one match out of the box of matches and turned that into some cloth. She turned the cloth into a hole punch, and the hole punch into bread crumbs, and then she turned the bread crumbs into a stamp with "Micchan" engraved on it in a cute font. She paused here to take in a long breath.

"Was it a good idea to make the map disappear?" asked Glassianne.

"I've memorized the whole thing."

"Oh, impressive, as always."

"Well then, to continue. *Inkan* [seal] to *inkamu* [mic]." In the end, she'd turned the map into a microphone headset. "I made it the style of headset that conducts through bones. These, we can use

even with earplugs in. However—obviously—plugging your ears on the battlefield is dangerous. Keep your information transmission covert, Anne. Please let us know about any shuriken fire in particular."

"Of course. But wow, your magic is so convenient, Micchan."

Taking out matches one by one, she remade each of them. Glassianne glanced over to the room beside them. Deluge and Bluebell were arguing. Properly speaking, they should have Deluge put on a headset as well. But they'd proposed that already for the earlier attack, and she'd turned them down, saying, "I'll be operating freely on my own."

It seemed as though she wanted to avoid cooperating with them as much as possible. Glassianne didn't know what her reason was, but she was being stubborn. Since it wasn't unusual for people in high positions to be stubborn, Glassianne's crew would put up the appearance of obeying, but they still decided to make a few extra headsets.

The headsets were one thing, but for the earplugs, they'd be in trouble if they didn't get her to put some in. Since Micchan had been talking loud enough for the other two to hear as well, they'd managed to share that information—hopefully. They could probably hand them the earplugs later.

"Your magic is convenient, too, Anne."

"Oh, no, my magic is really just… Whoa there." Glassianne put a finger to the frame of her glasses. Scenes flipped through her lenses one after another. They went by so fast no one but Glassianne would be able to recognize each and every single one of the scenes as scenes. Her dynamic vision had been good to begin with, its affinity with her magic made it stronger, and she'd also strengthened it through training, enabling her to now check scenes while shuffling through them at high speed. Currently, she was focused on monitoring the area around Puk Puck's estate.

Glassianne's magic was her "mysterious glasses." They had the power to show in her lenses what was currently happening at any scene she had seen before. There had been a change in front of Puk Puck's estate. She set it to that image and zoomed in. A vehicle passed by the front of Puk Puck's estate. It looked like a fancy foreign car.

"There's this strange car," said Glassianne.

"Is it a magical car?" asked Micchan.

“No, it looks like a normal one.” On the side of the car was the insignia of a bay laurel crown with waterfowl wings growing from it. The same design decorated the gates of Puk Puck’s estate.

“Micchan, do you know the emblem Puk Puck uses?”

“A bay laurel crown with waterfowl wings.”

“Okay, discovered a suspicious car that’s blatantly Puk Faction. Pursuit commenced!”

A magical car was one thing, but if it was a regular car, she could follow it more easily with her glasses than on foot. Those in the car wouldn’t be able to stop her from tracking it, and being inside a vehicle, it would be hard for them to evade sudden attacks. The fact that they were only sending a car when they were up against an enemy force in the city meant their opponent was unused to these sorts of situations. Even if they did have some experienced people, they could assume the ones who had gone out to search for Premium Sachiko had been all of them. It would only be attendants to more important people remaining in the estate.

“I think those magical girls from earlier may have requested backup,” said Glassianne. “It seems safe to assume they’ve already secured Premium Sachiko.”

“It’s gotta be that thing,” said Micchan. “The four-dimensional bag Snow White had hanging from her belt. This means Premium Sachiko was inside it. Then it was the right choice after all not to do any attacks that might flub and hit that, too.”

“So what do we do? Attack the car?”

“If the car is backup, then if we leave it alone, it’ll guide us to the enemy’s location.”

“You think that would actually work?”

“But they’re being a little blatant, so it could be a decoy. We can’t have all of us charging right in, so let’s have me go, plus a few demons borrowed from Miss Deluge.”

“Okay, let’s do that.”

When Glassianne turned to Deluge, their eyes met. She made no particular complaints, so Glassianne interpreted that as approval.

“If we let them meet up with the others, it’ll bolster their forces, and that won’t be good. So then the plan’s for them to say bye-bye partway.” Micchan pulled a coin purse from her pocket, and with a jingle, she dumped her small change out onto the tatami and picked up one coin. “*Kinsen* [coin] to *minsen* [Chinese coin]. *Minsen* [Chinese coin] to *mimisen* [earplugs].” She then created earplugs for

all of them.

When Glassianne looked over at Deluge, she was already on her feet, looking over at them. It seemed she'd heard their conversation, after all. Micchan tossed earplugs to Deluge and Bluebell. Deluge caught hers in one hand, while Bluebell nearly dropped hers, but caught them somehow. Micchan tried tossing them the headpieces as well, assuming Deluge would reject it, but they took those, too.

"Okay, I'll get going," said Micchan. "Leader, you handle the monitoring of the estate area. Miss Deluge, you can go about the city as needed. Make things quick. Lots of cops have shown up at the amusement park. Everyone, make sure you're not seen… There's no one around right now, yes?"

Glassianne adjusted her glasses and switched her viewpoint so she was looking down on their current position from above. "It's okay; there's no one here. Now's your chance."

"Right then, let's go."

Without making a sound, Micchan opened up a window and went outside, and Dark Cutie, Deluge, and Bluebell followed. They had just been squatting on an empty house close to Puk's estate. It would be a pain if any of the residents of the area were to spot them climbing in and out of windows, so Glassianne had to check her glasses to make sure there was no one around before they went in or out.

Glassianne shifted her glasses once more, then fixed her viewpoint on the vehicle that had come out of the estate. She checked ahead, behind, left, and right, then informed the others that the single driver was the only one inside, also adding that though she was wearing a suit, based on her appearance, she was probably a magical girl. Shifting to an aerial viewpoint, looking down on the vehicle from above, she followed after it.

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

There were lots of tall buildings in W City; they made useful resting spots for magical girls to hide from the eyes of others.

Taking a seat at the edge of the highest spot on the roof of one of these skyscrapers, Hamuel considered what to do now. Her subordinate Shufflins were in hiding in various places around the city.

She'd suffered devastating losses: two hearts, four clubs, five diamonds, and even worse with the spades—in addition to the three face cards that had already been captured, she'd lost her strongest fighter, the Ace. Since the spades had taken the brunt of the violence in their retreat, she'd also lost seven others. Right now, only two of them were left: the numbers three and two.

If you were going to invest all your forces with the intention of making this your decisive battle, but then you got hit with a surprise attack and ran away with your tail between your legs, catastrophic damage was inevitable. Overall numbers aside, in terms of fighting capability, theirs was now reduced to less than half…or a third, a fourth, a fifth. Though the ice user who had defeated the Ace of Spades had fallen, Hamuel had received reports that a magical girl with a lily of the valley on her back had escaped carrying her. It would be too optimistic to assume she had died. Even if Hamuel had defeated a few homunculi, it hadn't been worth it at all.

Her time was limited. The situation in W City was changing minute by minute. If Hamuel were left behind, she'd wind up as nothing more than a tourist who'd just come to waste Shufflins. What she had to think about was how to accomplish her goal, and if she couldn't do that, then to what degree she could compromise.

She had three options.

The first was to retreat now.

Another would be to throw the forces she had left at the enemy to create an opportunity where she could abduct Premium Sachiko.

The last would be to make an offer of cooperation to the forces led by the magical girl who had defeated the Ace of Spades, wring out conditions that would advantage her even slightly, and build a common front.

The first option she wanted to avoid, if possible. If she were to leave now, she'd be stuck with the label of the incompetent commander who had used up Shufflins in vain without a single result to show for it. At best, she'd never see the light of day again, and worst case, she'd be sent to the lab or given an order that basically meant she was going to die in a fight and breathe her last somewhere—either of those would be a more realistic end.

The second option was all but a pipe dream. If there was no interference, there would be a chance of success, but things were like this now because of interference, and Shufflin II was hard put

to it.

The third option was dicey and difficult, too. Her reconnaissance units had informed her of the fact that the group led by the magical girl who defeated the Ace of Spades was fighting with the Puk Faction, which was trying to retrieve Premium Sachiko to use her in the ceremony. Barring any absurd situation like a schism within the Puk Faction or a struggle for credit within the Osk Faction, this meant there was a third force here. Their initial contact had been awful, but depending on what the other party's goal was, cooperation was a possibility. That was in the case that they wished for the ceremony to fail or intended to kidnap Premium Sachiko. The issue was that even if the conditions for cooperation were in place, they might not need Hamuel's support. Hamuel couldn't be acting to shift the balance of power if that third party was already plenty strong. An offer of cooperation from someone in a weaker position was asking to be taken advantage of, used up, and thrown away. Unless there was particular value in her cooperation, Hamuel would just be subordinated.

Hamuel could see nothing but negatives in all these options. She resumed her analysis of the powers at play in an attempt to squeeze out a fourth option. Her time for consideration was limited.

INTERLUDE

Shadow Gale kept on gesturing over the course of three hours, and by the time she finally got the armor to bring her a TV, she came to a realization: There was no outlet in this room.

It was extremely difficult to express "extension cord" with gestures. Soba, climbing rope, piano wire, a game controller, a LAN cable, a sickle and chain, a rope with a hook, a snake toy, nylon string, a chain of sausages, plastic tape, bandages, and various other long objects were presented to her and then taken away. Wondering just how much stuff they had here, and also why they couldn't come up with an extension cord when they had this much stuff, Shadow Gale's shoulders slumped, until thirty minutes later, she finally realized: She shouldn't have told the armor to bring her a long thing but rather that she couldn't use the TV like this.

While pointing at the TV, Shadow Gale used both her arms to make a big X mark. That caused the armor to bring in a tool set of various types of screwdrivers, and since that was actually something Shadow Gale did think she'd need, she kept that, and next she pointed to the plug on the TV, then to the whole interior of the room, trying to emphasize, "*There's no electricity*."

And now, finally, an extension cord came. Apparently, one wasn't enough; the armor had to connect a whole string of them to make it this far, adding cord B to cord A, both of which she'd ripped open plastic wrapping to pull out, further adding that to a cord outside of the room, sticking a door stopper in so that the cord wouldn't be crushed by the heavy metal door, and finally, the TV was plugged in. Thinking of the long path to reach this point, tears sprang to Shadow Gale's eyes.

"Thank you… Honestly, thank you so much." Shadow Gale bent at the waist to bow deeply, and the armor put her left hand to her own waist, doing a little wave with her right hand in front of her face. It seemed she was saying, "*Don't worry about it*."

And perhaps that was true enough. Shadow Gale was trying to take advantage of their kindness in order to escape. It wasn't as if she felt no pangs of conscience. But they had been the ones to start this. You didn't need to hold back with someone who would do something like kidnap you and lock you up. Patricia would surely have commended her for this. Maybe Pfle would, too. Though privately Shadow Gale had rather complicated feelings about receiving commendation from the latter.

First, she turned the main power on, and then with the remote control the armor had given her, she turned on the power. Light ran along the fifteen-inch-squared screen, and next, from the speakers came a grating noise and static—

"Huh?"

She changed the channel. All that showed on every channel was static. What was happening? Shadow Gale ran up to the TV, smacked the top, smacked the side, hitting slightly harder with each strike. Still the TV screen showed nothing. Shadow Gale realized something as she hit it: This TV was cube-shaped. It wasn't a flat-panel LCD screen. It was a CRT—in other words, it couldn't receive digital terrestrial broadcasting.

Feeling on the verge of collapse, Shadow Gale propped herself up on the TV. Compared with a flat screen TV, the CRT was exceptionally stable. It could even support Shadow Gale's weight, which was heavier than when she was in human form.

CHAPTER 4

RACING THROUGH THE CITY, PASSING THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN

◇ **Uluru**

She'd thought she'd been fairly straightforward when she'd reported they were in serious trouble right now. Her message read that they were being pursued by the Osk Faction as well as one other mysterious force. She'd mentioned the card soldiers and their equipment, as well as what else the group had been up against: the creepy monsters, the scholar-style magical girl, the magical girl in black, the magic the two of them used, everything. Uluru had mentioned being attacked by enemy forces in the amusement park and that some unknown figure had helped them with shuriken. She'd said they somehow managed to escape by the skin of their teeth, and she wasn't entirely sure they could defeat these enemies. As much as Uluru hated to complain, she had to be honest about the situation.

—And also…

She'd also mentioned that Sorami had been killed. Uluru thought she'd said everything, no omissions.

But it didn't feel as if it had gotten through. Puk Puck's reply seemed casual, unbothered: "Sounds real tough. It'll be over soon, so just do your best, okay?" Uluru wanted her and the Puk Faction's forces to come save them, but not a single line in that reply mentioned anything about coming to help—even though the ceremony was important, and the key figure, Sachiko, should have been just as important.

It couldn't be that the message hadn't reached Puk Puck. Uluru had told her the facts; this was clearly a strange reply. Uluru wanted to hold her head in her hands. She glared at her trembling arms.

But holding her head in her hands wouldn't change anything. Sorami wasn't coming back. This was only going to make Sachiko, who was looking at Uluru anxiously, worry more.

Puk Puck's smiling face rose in her mind. Puk Puck was never wrong. She'd set Uluru on the right path. No way Puk Puck could be wrong this time, either. Even without the ceremony, she cared for Uluru and Sachiko, and she had to be mourning Sorami's death more deeply than anyone. Uluru was just being selfish for wanting her to express her shock more openly. She was probably stricken and crying and had done her very best not to let it show in her response. Uluru had heard that those who stood at the top, important people, had to do that.

If Puk Puck couldn't send help, that had to be because she didn't have enough hands on her end, either. She had a lot to do, like set things up for the ceremony, arrange to keep Sachiko safe once she'd come back, and also protect the estate—all things that required manpower and preparation.

There was swaying overhead. A car was going over the bridge, gushing putrid exhaust in its wake. Hiding under a bridge made Uluru feel more miserable than she would have imagined. From here, she could see the river and the waterside, the bridge, and the tall grass that concealed them. Through the grass, she could see guardrails, and beyond that was a chain curry shop and a karaoke parlor.

Sorami had said she wanted to go to karaoke, just once. Not even because she liked singing, but because something as ridiculous as "I totally look like I'd be the type to go hang out at karaoke, but I've never done it" had bugged her. Puk Puck had said, "The air's bad in karaoke parlors, so you can go once you're an adult." Uluru, who agreed with everything Puk Puck said, had also been against karaoke. That day, Sorami had pouted until dinner was over.

In the end, the day Sorami could sing at karaoke would never come. If Sorami were here, just looking up at a karaoke parlor from under a bridge, would she have laughed, or been mad, or exasperated?

Uluru clenched her fist. Magical girls were strong. Uluru was

strong, too. She was strong in body and mind.

She and Sorami had been together since the orphanage. Up until Puk Puck had scouted them and invited them to her estate, they had always been together, just Sachiko, Sorami, and Uluru—because it had been easier to get by together. Had the three of them been on their own, people would have stolen from them. But as a unit, they were three times as strong, and no one would steal from them so easily. If one of the trio caught a cold, one would nurse her back to health, while the third would go swipe some cold medicine. If one was hungry, then another would give her a pastry or candy that she'd been holding on to. When they went to bed, they held one another's hands, and if one of them was scared, they would comfort her.

That was how they'd always lived, until they had moved into Puk Puck's estate. Ever since then, there was no longer the need to live like that. They didn't have to stick together anymore, but Uluru, Sorami, and Sachiko had remained together anyway.

Uluru clenched her fist tight. She could hear her bones creaking.

Magical girls were strong, so even if Sorami was killed, she couldn't cry.

Sorami had always been the strongest in mock combat or sparring. Puk Puck had expressed concern about Sachiko's future. She'd once advised Uluru, "You should be resourceful," and Uluru had asked back, "What does 'resourceful' mean?" But Puk Puck generally never said anything to Sorami. Uluru had even been jealous of her, because it had felt as if Puk Puck had trusted her most.

But she'd been killed anyway. Uluru covered her tightly clenched right fist with her left hand.

Uluru had to be calm and collected. She had to be easygoing, even when scary things happened, like Sorami. She was a magical girl, so she could do that. Magical girls neither cried nor wailed. She had to do what she had to do. She couldn't let herself get swept away by her feelings. Puk Puck was about to hold this ceremony in order to save the Magical Kingdom. Uluru would do everything in her power to make the ceremony a success. She was absolutely, absolutely going to bring Sachiko back, even if it cost her life. Sorami had managed to pull that off. Then Uluru would do it, too.

A magical girl could do that. She'd use the power Puk Puck had

given her for Puk Puck's sake. She might want to cry over Sorami, but a magical girl was not allowed.

When they'd driven off the enemy earlier, Uluru had abandoned herself to emotion and screamed. Of course, it had been a lie that she would blow herself up and take them all with her, but it was a fact that she wanted to kill them all.

In order to activate Uluru's magic, there were several conditions: She had to speak, and her subject had to hear her; Uluru herself had to be aware she was lying; and it did actually have to be a lie. Uluru's cry had fulfilled all those conditions, and the enemy had believed her lie and run away.

That had successfully driven the enemy away, but ultimately, it had still been just a lie. No matter how much she hated the enemy, she couldn't hurt them. The most she could do was threaten them.

She squeezed the fist wrapped in her other hand tightly.

It had to have been years ago when they'd had this conversation: Puk Puck had gathered Uluru, Sachiko, and Sorami together and told them, "You guys make sure to always stay friends, all right? And I'll always take care of you."

Sorami was gone now. But she still had Sachiko. She would protect Sachiko. She remembered that Puk Puck had told her, "You're the big sister, Uluru, so help the others, 'kay?" She would do as Puk Puck had ordered. She'd been unable to protect Sorami. But she would protect Sachiko.

Releasing her hand from her fist, she looked to the side. Snow White was holding up a shuriken in the light of the sun reflecting off the river, looking hard at it.

Snow White was detached. Uluru would be lying to say she wasn't sick of that attitude. But though it was frustrating how strong Snow White was, Uluru was forced to recognize it. Uluru alone could have fought off just the shadow beast at most. Snow White had been fighting with both the shadow beast and the magical girl in black. It had been tough to follow her movements, watching her swing and thrust her *naginata* and exchange blows with the enemy.

It wasn't a big deal to Snow White that their lives were in danger right now. To her, Sorami's death was common enough. Snow White was a professional magical girl who focused on completing the job, caring about little else. So then Uluru would use that. At the very least, Snow White wasn't going to betray them or

screw things up badly and land all of them in a tight spot.

◇ Puk Puck

Uluru had requested help. But there was no one who could go save them now.

Things were tough enough with just the Osk Faction. Yet another group coming in to attack was a disaster. If they were leading a large group of demons that had never been seen before, they were obviously not simply anyone.

Various forces from various places had gathered together to target Sachiko. Right now, W City was in the middle of an incredible mess, and Uluru wasn't whining when she said the most the girls could do was just escape. Puk Puck thought that if Uluru was saying so, then it had to be true. Uluru was a show-off and didn't like to reveal weakness. Even if she were injured or lost things or people spoke badly of her, she'd put on a tough face and puff out her chest as if to say that this was precisely what made her strong. And this was the girl who was now dropping her bluff to ask for help.

"Sorry, Uluru." With that apology, Puk Puck plucked a potato chip in her fingers.

No matter how she calculated it, she didn't have enough people. Sending in an insufficient force to help them would only lead to more casualties. The single viable option was to have the girls do what they could with the number of people they had.

Puk Puck wanted to save them all if she could. Sachiko wasn't just an important part of the ceremony—she was Puk Puck's friend. She'd wanted to save Sorami, too. She didn't want to think about Uluru and Sachiko perishing, too.

She bit into the potato chip, its salty flavor prominent, then grabbed her cup and tossed it all back. The flat, lukewarm cola sloshed down her throat. Even like this, it was a stimulating drink.

Carbonation, salt—these things were stimulating because she had a body. Puk Puck liked the sort of stimulation that could be had because she was incarnated in a body, and not merely a spirit. Though not all stimulation was good. Some she wanted to distance herself from as much as possible: the deaths of those close to her, her own death, things like that.

Even if she thought, *I want to avoid that at all costs, I don't want that*, these events happened anyway. Sorami had been killed. Sachiko and Uluru were in dire straits. And she didn't want Snow White, who she'd just met, to die, either.

That magical girl named Snow White was a rare treasure, one she wanted to keep close. Even the fact of her crushing Grim Heart on its own made her highly valuable. Puk Puck was not okay with using up Snow White when the girl was actually interested now, and they were starting to make friends.

But even so, Puk Puck had been unable to send backup.

She gazed up at the ceiling. Painted there in splendid brushstrokes was a heavenly maiden clad in a robe of feathers and soaring upward. The guests invited here would sigh at its beauty, but to Puk Puck, it was a familiar sight that she saw every day. She was sick of it; the painting was no longer stimulating.

She didn't have enough people. Even if she squeezed them down to the last drop, it was still not enough. Multiple parts were necessary for this ceremony. She had to arrange for personnel to protect the ceremony's location, and she also had to dispatch experts to select the magical tools to be used. There were various other roles to be fulfilled, too.

Just as insects would swarm around sweet nectar, enemy forces were gathering around Sachiko. Even if Puk Puck wanted to send support to those dear to her, she couldn't do it.

Puk Puck thought of Sorami, and a tear streaked down her right cheek.

◇ Pfle

Pfle began receiving detailed reports of the activity on the scene.

There were many magical girls who would express things in a particularly exaggerated manner, perhaps to make themselves look important, but the trio Pfle had assigned to Deluge were the rare sort who would tell you things just exactly as they had happened.

Pfle looked outside to see droplets of rain hitting the window.

The sentimental thought of *I wonder if it's raining where Mamori is being confined* crossed her mind, but she made a conscious effort not to think about it. More important was that the sunny weather in W City made ideal conditions for Dark Cutie to be able to fight at

full capacity.

Additionally, Pfle's forces were superior: Micchan the Dictionary, Glassianne, Princess Deluge, and the few hundred new-model combat homunculi under Deluge's command. She could boast of the greatest fighting force in W City, and it looked as if the success of this plan to abduct Premium Sachiko was close at hand.

But that was odd.

The Osk Faction had deployed a Shufflin and one magical girl commanding them, with no additional forces. Pfle could understand this. The Osk Faction was trying to obstruct something that had been decided in confidence. They couldn't invest all their forces when they were already in a bad light from the incident with Grim Heart. Pfle could imagine that a commander who didn't want to add to her disgrace would not request backup.

However, the Puk Faction weren't investing additional forces right now, either. This was strange. Their headquarters, Puk Puck's estate, was in the city. And they had just cause on their side being the ones under attack, the victim side. Going to save their allies who were under attack was a legitimate enough reason to invest a force surpassing that of the enemy. Furthermore, they had the means and the advantage of being on their home turf.

That one passenger car had been the only thing to actually emerge.

Those who had fought with Micchan and Dark Cutie must have felt personally how strong the two of them were. And that would also go for the material advantage of the combat-use homunculi Deluge commanded. It seemed unlikely that hadn't been reported to Puk Puck. It didn't make sense that Puk Puck would hear that report, then only send one car as backup and leave them like that.

The magical girl who'd shown up and thrown those shuriken from afar had still not been identified. Even if she was the secret ace up their sleeve, she was too passive to act as backup.

The Puk Faction and the Osk Faction were clashing over the fugitive Premium Sachiko. The Magical-Girl Hunter Snow White had gone to the Puk Faction. Everything was as Deluge had said. How had she acquired that information? Or rather—it wasn't how had Deluge done it, but how had the one *behind* her done it.

This was something you could call highly confidential. Without deep knowledge of the internal affairs of both the Puk and Osk factions, or of both, there was no way you would know. However, if

there was someone who was informed on one of those two factions, or on both, then why would they bother to use artificial magical girls and Pfle? If they were a part of the hierarchy of the Magical Kingdom, and also in a high position, then they didn't have to use the roundabout method of kidnapping Shadow Gale to use Pfle. They could just use their own soldiers.

Their course of action was inconsistent.

With a self-deprecating smile, Pfle drew the curtains. Though she understood she was missing something, she didn't know what. Shadow Gale had been hiding something. Was that connected to this incident?

Pfle was aware she'd become a little negative. She wasn't being constructive enough. If thinking wasn't enough to understand, then there were things to do before thinking. Pfle had told Deluge the Magical Girl Resources Department didn't have much in the way of combat personnel. That was a fact. However, even if someone didn't excel in violence, that didn't mean they were without ability. Saying she had few combat operatives also meant she had more whom she relied on for other matters.

Pfle was now nearly certain she was not being monitored and turned on her magical phone. She would send her underlings into action and gather information.

◇ Micchan the Dictionary

Crossing over the roofs of skyscrapers and residential buildings, Micchan followed Glassianne's instructions in pursuit of the suspicious foreign car. Once the car arrived at its destination, she and the ten demons high up in the sky would make their assault and secure the human or magical girl who was inside the vehicle.

Micchan was fairly confident in her recall ability, and not because she was known as "the Dictionary." Comparing with the map of the urban area in her mind, she deduced where the vehicle would currently be running as she simultaneously ran over there. She cut across the city, then came out to a road that ran along the mountain. Doing a circle around the city, she continued to run after the vehicle. Less cover like high-rises and residences made trailing it harder, but with support from Glassianne, it was nothing at all.

She emerged onto an animal trail that cut through the

vegetation over a tunnel. From there, she merged onto the national highway, hiding in the shadow of a truck to follow her target. The car was sticking to the speed limit, driving no faster than five miles over. It didn't seem to be in any hurry, given how lawful its driving was. Still, it was also driving in too carefree a manner to label it cautious. The way they were yielding to pedestrians, even at crosswalks where there was no light, was a little bit too lax for someone assigned to a potentially fatal mission.

The emblem that marked the vehicle's side of the bay laurel crown with waterfowl wings was clearly that of the Puk Faction. The car windows were tinted dark, and Micchan couldn't really tell what was inside.

There was no way they hadn't been informed that the team that had been searching for Sachiko had been attacked. Did this mean this was the backup that had been sent out because of that report? The foreign car was a normal passenger vehicle with no magic cast on it, and Micchan could only sense one person within. Courtesy car seemed to be a more apt descriptor than backup.

Calling a courtesy car? A courtesy car*? In a tough situation like this?*

It couldn't be anything so stupid as that. Magical Girls might see the Three Sages as practically divine, but they couldn't be that disconnected from worldly sense.

Descending the mountain, Micchan ran down a farm road–like stretch that ran past cultivated fields. That expensive-looking foreign car looked entirely out of place on the rural road.

Coming off the farm road–like stretch, the car headed back into the wilderness. Micchan checked her position against her mental map. She'd raced through the urban area, come out into the wilderness, and done a circle of the city perimeter; the car just kept going. It was about to circle a quarter of the city, so then if Micchan were to move in a linear manner, she'd get where the car was going far faster.

Even if this was a carefree driver, that wouldn't change the fact that faster was better. If they were taking the trouble to go the long way around, that meant there had to be a reason for it. For example —yes, that they were worried about being followed. That would be a reason to take the long way around.

Are they watching out for me?

It didn't look that way at all. The car was meandering aimlessly.

If they were watching for someone on their tail, they'd have been more focused. But if they weren't even aware of what was behind them, then there was no need to be going the long way around. So then didn't that mean there was another reason they were circling around like this?

Running straight down the winding mountain road, kicking up trees and grass, she headed onward.

Something doesn't feel right.

If there was a reason for the car going along a pointlessly circuitous route, then it could be because they were cautious about being trailed, or one other thing: a decoy. They were moving around the car as live bait to reel in the enemy.

Micchan figured this was 90 percent decoy and 10 percent caution toward being trailed. Regardless, it would be a foolish idea to split their fighting forces here, but Micchan didn't like the idea of just letting this car go free, either.

She would rather get rid of them.

Micchan gave the demons the order. "All units to the descent coming off the mountain. We're gonna clean them up within thirty seconds."

Unfurling her mental map, she visualized the shortest route to that location. Unlike the car, Micchan could cut straight through the middle of the woods where there weren't even animal trails to get there. She was fine as long as her sense of direction was right.

She ran across the mountain at full speed, stepping on grasses, breaking trees, leaping off cliffs, and racing through valleys. She was used to moving through the wilderness. She'd participated in the Archfiend Cram School's survival training, and she'd ranked close to the top, too.

Within ten minutes, she arrived at the bottom of the mountain, where she gave instructions to the Demon Wings. She had them hide around the area, in the shadows of trees, under leaves, covering them with earth and such, while Micchan herself made a ball out of some soil and held it in her hand.

"*Shoukyuu* [globule] to *shoujuu* [rifle]."

Now she had an automatic rifle. Looking around the area, she saw a bus stop. Someone must have been waiting there until a moment ago, as some suitable smoke was rising from the ashtray there. Micchan held her hand over the smoke to catch it in her palm.

"*Shuryuuen* [cigarette smoke] to *shuryuudan* [grenade]." She decided to make two hand grenades just in case.

She also pulled an empty can out of the garbage bag beside the vending machine, twisting and screwing it up, plucking off the top to rip it apart into pieces with her bare hands. It was dirty and sticky with dried juice, but since she was just taking garbage for her own use, she didn't have the right to complain.

"Right then, it's about time."

Not even ten minutes had passed when the foreign car came down the mountain under the speed limit. Right as it did, Micchan ran out onto the road and plucked one of the steel scraps jangling in her hand.

"*Teppen* [iron scrap] to *teppeki* [iron wall]."

With Micchan's magic, she could only make things as big as what she could hold in her hand. That was why she'd strengthened her muscles, training enough to be able to take the weight. In the middle of the road, she created a magical iron wall eight inches thick, five feet tall, and six and a half feet wide. Then she grabbed another piece of scrap metal in her fingers, then a third, and a fourth. "*Teppen* [iron scrap] to *teppeki* [iron wall]. *Teppen* [iron scrap] to *teppeki* [iron wall]. *Teppen* [iron scrap] to *teppeki* [iron wall]."

A shock, then the ground swayed. The foreign car crashed into the four layers of iron walls, and they stopped it with only a slight wobble.

Pulling out the pin of the hand grenade, Micchan tossed it over the wall. She then slid herself into the ditch by the roadside, plugging her ears and opening her mouth.

Micchan's deluxe grenade shot the frame of the car ten feet into the air before it fell again. The explosion and then the impact of the car's fall made the trees around her shake, and dry leaves rained down. The iron walls, which had only wobbled when they brought the vehicle to a halt, were cut down by the explosion.

Covered in dead brown leaves, Micchan stood from the roadside ditch. Black smoke was rising from the foreign car. Though few people passed by the descent of this mountain road, police would come in five minutes at earliest, ten at latest, and rubberneckers would come even faster.

She would end this job quickly and definitively. Automatic rifle in hand, she took a cautious step forward, then leaped to the side and rolled. Shuriken and kunai broke through the concrete to stab into the earth. The demons fluttered about restlessly.

Micchan squeezed the trigger of her rifle and shot down more shuriken with a wall of bullets. It wasn't just one or two shuriken, however—countless shuriken were slicing off branches as they flew toward her.

Micchan looked up—standing at the top of the tallest tree was a ninja.

◇ Uluru

Time passed slowly but steadily. But Uluru wasn't simply waiting. She was biding her time, knowing full well that once night came, their opponent would have a hard time fighting.

Snow White could hear people's innermost feelings. If their opponent thought, *Hope this doesn't happen to me*, she'd know. The magical girl they'd fought in the amusement park, Dark Cutie, used shadows in battle, but she needed light to do so. If the sun wasn't out, she'd have to use streetlights, neon sights, or her own light source. As long as there wasn't complete darkness, she could make shadows. The girl was a strong fighter on her own, but it there was

no doubt her abilities would be hindered by the night, per Snow White's explanation.

"Dark Cutie? How do you know her name?" asked Uluru.

"Because she's a famous magical girl," Snow White answered.

"You've never seen the *Cutie Healer* series, pon? Dark Cutie is the rival who appears in *Cutie Healer Galaxy*, pon. She was an exception among the villains, one who was never defeated or reformed, pon. Even after the show ended, she's appeared many times in the annual festival and in the *Cutie Healer* movies that all the Cutie Healers participate in. Even watching as a fan of good magical girls, the way she's such a committed villain who's never wound up as comic relief, even in the movies, always remaining aloof and continuing to make Cutie Healer and the others suffer will really make you go *Ohhh*, pon. Many fans still talk about her final battle with Cutie Altair, and Cutie Vega on Mars is still…"

"Fal," chided Snow White, "you're being a little loud."

"Ah, sorry, pon."

"So then she's an anime character?" asked Uluru.

"It's a well-known fact that the characters who appear in magical-girl anime are based on real magical girls, pon. Having an anime character based on yourself is the greatest honor for a magical girl, and so many struggle to achieve—"

"Hey, Fal? If this is going to be long, then don't, okay?"

"Oh, sorry, pon."

"You only ever get this excited when you talk about magical-girl anime, Fal."

"You don't have to put it that way, pon."

This exchange between mascot and magical girl couldn't help but make Uluru smile. But then she pulled her expression tight. *No, no*, she scolded herself, *I can't be softening over something like this*. Looking over at Sachiko beside her, she saw a brooding expression she had never seen on Sachiko before, her head slumping. Though it was indeed bad to soften up and let your guard down, looking at Sachiko's face, she felt like she couldn't just leave her be.

Uluru laid her hand on Sachiko's shoulder. Sachiko trembled and looked at Uluru. Her expression seemed less brooding and more frightened. This really wasn't good.

"Sachiko, you don't have to worry. Though Uluru's not telling you to let your guard down, either. But you really don't have to worry. You're gonna get back to Lady Puk Puck, even if it costs

Uluru's life."

Sachiko opened her mouth slightly, and tears pooled in her eyes, immediately overflowing to drip down to the end of her chin. She turned her face away, hiding it in her arms as she muttered, "I'm sorry." Uluru gave Snow White a look over Sachiko's shoulder, nodding at her.

"Listen, Sachiko. Uluru's not saying don't apologize, but you can do that later. Right now, um… How did that go again? Action over apologies. Action. Like, if we can get back to the estate, you can apologize as much as you like then. Well, maybe it'd be annoying if you apologize too much, though."

Uluru was making a conscious effort to put on as kind a face as possible, but she didn't know if she was actually smiling kindly or not. Squinting in the light reflected off the surface of the river, she slowly said to Sachiko, "And about causing trouble for Lady Puk Puck… Well, just take care not to do it next time. As long as we can get back, as long as the ceremony goes off without a hitch, you can apologize as much as you like. So whatever happens, we have to get back. Uluru's made up her mind, you know—that Uluru will absolutely, absolutely keep you safe, no matter what. Uluru is going to bring you back home." Since she'd said it all in one breath, she ran out of air. Inhaling deep, she continued. "Even if…Uluru dies, you serve Lady Puk Puck, okay, Sachiko? Make sure the ceremony is a success, and be useful to her afterward, too, okay?"

Mouth still open, Sachiko clenched her teeth and shook her head. "I'm sorry… I'm sorry, sis… I…don't want to do the ceremony."

What is she talking about? Uluru wondered, but then, once she understood what Sachiko meant, she grabbed her by the collar. Snow White cut between them, trying to stop her, but Uluru ignored her and yelled at Sachiko, "You've got to be kidding me!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry…but, but…"

"Don't give me this! Bullshit! Why, why?! But Sorami's dead! Everyone wants you to come back so badly! How can you still be saying that?!"

"Uluru, you're being too loud," cautioned Snow White.

"The enemy'll find us that way, pon."

"You stupid… You…!"

Restraining Uluru behind her with one hand, Snow White turned back to Sachiko. "Tell me, too, please. Why are you so

afraid? I can hear your deepest thoughts, and you seem absolutely terrified."

Still covering her face, Sachiko shook her head fiercely. "I don't know! I don't know! But, but…! When I think about the ceremony, all I can think about is awful things, and I can't stop! I don't really know, but…"

Uluru also knew well that Sachiko was a coward. But right now, this was a little different from her usual fearfulness. It was hard to put into words what exactly was different, but something indeed was. This wasn't how she usually was. Maybe she was just in a muddle because Sorami was gone. Uluru's clenched fists went slack. She was about to say something to Sachiko when a synthetic voice cut in.

"Magical girl detected, pon! She's coming closer!"

Uluru yanked Sachiko to her feet, and Snow White tossed Sachiko into her bag without a second thought before racing away.

◇ Pfle

Pfle searched and searched for anyone who fit the description of "shuriken-using magical girl." Very few magical girls had a ninja motif—that went all the more so for those who could throw shuriken from so far away, they were out of sight.

When Pfle combed through the Magical Girl Resources Department's files, it came up immediately: the magical girl who was currently missing, Ripple. The incident where she had gone missing had become famous because of Archfiend Pam's assassination. During the investigation of the assassin, an antiestablishment faction had suddenly barged in, and vicious magical girls whom the antiestablishment faction had released from prison had gone wild. 7753, a member of Magical Girl Resources, had also gotten dragged into it.

Pfle tapped her forehead with her index finger.

That incident had occurred after Pfle had become the chief of the Magical Girl Resources Department. 7753 had been there at the time, so it would have been natural for Pfle to have given her orders. But for some reason, Pfle didn't get involved at all, instead leaving matters to resolve on their own.

Pfle knew herself.

Pfle the magical girl would have tried to more actively intervene. This was the type of incident that involved people you wouldn't want to investigate. She could've pulled off quite a few interesting maneuvers by sticking her head into things. And if she played her hand well, she could even receive a promotion—a place closer to the Magical Kingdom, somewhere with more authority, capable of doing more.

It was difficult to believe that she had just let things be… But that's exactly what she did.

And if she were to go even further back, then another mystery emerged.

Pfle was the head of the Magical Girl Resources Department. She had climbed up to the top fairly and honestly, without any deceit, fraud, or bribery, or using any methods that would cause talk behind her back. But was the chief of the Magical Girl Resources Department a position you could reach because "people thought highly of you" and you "worked really hard"? And what's more, Pfle was said to have risen through the ranks rapidly. Wouldn't it make more sense for her to have used some methods she couldn't speak of to others?

For the magical girl named Pfle—the human named Kanoe Hitokouji—she got the sense that reaching her lofty position through the fortunes of the Hitokouji family, her grandfather's connections, or the shady activities of others was only natural. She wasn't naive in her self-evaluation. Though she might play the good girl in front of Mamori, she had more thorough and complete knowledge of her own true nature than anyone else.

She'd already figured something was going on, but now that hypothesis was solidifying before her more clearly.

Next, she opened up copies of meeting records of the highest conference of the Magical Kingdom's Central Authority. These were generally not open to browsing, but things were fairly flexible when you were a department head. What specifically was this ceremony Puk Puck was trying to hold? That was what Pfle wanted to know. Her capable subordinates didn't bother using their heads to determine which files Pfle needed and ended up providing her everything from the last whole month. She speed-read through it at two seconds per page.

There was also a list of magical girls who had disappeared; an unflinchingly large number, too. She looked up the magic used by

those who were currently missing. If Pfle could identify some kind of trend, she might be able to use that as material to reinforce her theory. For this, half the speed of the meeting records—one second per page—was enough. The heightened abilities of magical-girl bodies were useful in more than just fistfights.

Including time for consideration, it took a little less than thirty minutes. She had a basic idea in mind. If Puk Puck's aim was as Pfle predicted, then this wasn't the time to be getting involved with Premium Sachiko.

She would send someone to the scene, to W City. She needed a commander to control Deluge. Who would she leave that to? When she lined up the candidates in her mind, however, no one really seemed to fit the bill.

Trying to do this within the Magical Girl Resources Department would only be cause for greater strain. But she'd never have requested help from someone outside the department. Never mind outside or inside the department—Pfle even doubted herself. Where were magical girls she could trust, in the current situation?

Ah yes.

One person came to mind.

Pfle stood, pulled out her magical phone, and dialed a number. Outside the window, it was not only raining—the wind was blowing, rustling the leaves on the trees in the garden.

◇ Puk Puck

Though she was worried about Sachiko and the others, Puk Puck was unable to send them help. But she couldn't go to save them herself, either. There was nothing to do but line up three sitting cushions, roll up one into a pillow to lie down on, and toss and turn. When she heard the good news she'd been waiting for, she cried out in joy.

After a few moments of happiness, she reconsidered, thinking that was a little lacking in class. She smiled shyly instead, which gladdened her subordinates; all in all, a win-win.

"It's time I go pick her up, then."

Puk Puck had received reports that the estate was being watched. Magic would be needed in order to safely do the pickup and return, and to use magic, you needed people. It was for the

sake of this moment that she had not sent out help, making them wait at the estate so she had to work them hard now. Of course, Puk Puck, who had also been waiting, would do her best, too.

First, she changed her clothes.

Society judged people based on appearances—that included clothing. Puk Puck also suspected that worldview could be a part of how motif affected magical-girl powers, but she wasn't about to make a presentation about it at an academic conference.

Since she would be judged based on appearance, she couldn't go out wearing her house clothes.

Puk Puck tried on various outfits her servants brought her: an afternoon dress, a long-sleeved kimono, kindergartner clothes, an evening dress, and Lolita fashion. She discussed with her subordinates what sort of fashion she should attack with at a time like this, then selected a childlike dress that wouldn't stand out when mingling among humans but would nonetheless give a good impression, put on matching hair decorations, a necklace, socks, shorts, drawers, etc. She had her hair combed and styled and pinned with a hairband but became distracted by a headdress, thinking, *Maybe this is cute*. Puk Puck could be really indecisive at times like these.

She couldn't afford to waste a single moment. Right now, Sachiko and Uluru were still running and hiding from the enemy in fright, while Snow White was fighting desperately for them. Despite being in a position where she should be sending help, Puk Puck had been unable to do so because her forces were allocated elsewhere, so she had to restrain her fashion to the minimum level in order to swiftly accomplish her goal.

This task would normally take five hours, but she managed to whittle it down to an hour and a half. Considering how Sachiko and the others were struggling, she thought it was only obvious she should put in this much effort.

For cologne, she picked out one with as casual a fragrance as possible, and for nail polish, she went with a refined, pale-blue color.

She smiled brightly at the mirror and told herself that she would surely be able to make friends like this. Confidence begets results. Even for Sachiko—if she could have had more confidence in herself, she wouldn't have run away.

She selected a vehicle that wasn't too overbearing, but so as to

emphasize her seriousness, not too cute, either, with an eye to functionality with comfortable cushions to sit on, and got in. The front seats were divided from the back by a partition, so the rear space was only for Puk Puck. Careful to avoid wrinkling in her dress, she flopped over to lie down.

There would be one more person on the way back. Of course she wouldn't be able to lie down then. Even between friends, you had to mind your manners.

When leaving the estate, she had some casters quickly put up a special barrier that would keep others from noticing that the gates of the estate had opened or that a vehicle had left the gates. The things that were truly necessary, you couldn't tell others. Only Puk Puck's friends should know.

The vehicle did not rattle at all. It was no different from lying in her own room.

She rolled over and thought about Sachiko, who was still on the lam. She was a coward and a weakling, and she would immediately run away from anything unpleasant, but even so, Puk Puck loved her. When Sachiko cried, Puk Puck would pet her head and kindly ask her why she was upset. Sachiko would sniffle and tell Puk Puck about what sad thing had recently happened.

What sort of things would Sachiko tell Puk Puck about this time once she was home? She would surely tell her all about what awful things had happened, what sad things had happened.

Imagining petting Sachiko's head made Puk Puck feel nice. Sachiko's head was very well-shaped, and her hair would rub smoothly against her palm as they ran away from her strokes.

She would tell her new friend as well—about just how good, just how cute Sachiko was.

INTERLUDE

Shadow Gale had acquired a cord and a TV, so she couldn't keep hounding her captors for more. She decided she'd obediently accept the CRT and stealthily modify it.

"Thank you very much."

Bowing her head to the armor, she set the TV in a corner of the room. Now, once the armor left, she'd actually get started.

Still sitting, Shadow Gale stole a quiet glance behind her. The armor was still there. Since Shadow Gale didn't know where her eyes were positioned, it was kind of hard to tell which way her gaze was pointed, but she seemed to be looking at Shadow Gale.

Shadow Gale turned back to the armor and bowed her head. "Honestly, thank you so much."

Picking up the remote control, Shadow Gale turned on the power. The screen was unchanged—it was still static.

Oh, she realized. If her goal was to get a TV to kill time, and that TV was a CRT that didn't show anything, then why would Shadow Gale be satisfied? Putting herself in the armor's position to consider it, it seemed too suspicious.

"M-man…it doesn't show anything. Oh…dear." Repeating the same thing to herself, she changed the channels. Shadow Gale knew nothing would show up, no matter what channel she switched it to. But now, she pretended not to know that. "This is strange. How odd."

She emphasized with everything she had: "*I'm not doing anything suspicious*."

"Gee, I guess there's nothing I can do about this, huh? I borrowed a TV in order to kill time, but none of the channels are showing anything. Guess I have to give up…"

She heard the rattle of the armor moving followed by the metal door opening and closing. Shadow Gale turned around. The armor was gone. Shadow Gale's acting had tricked her.

Pumping a little fist, Shadow Gale hurriedly cleared her throat to cover that. Even if the armor was gone, it'd be a bad idea to be openly glad about it. The four black creatures were still there. These guys probably wouldn't go away. She had to move things along bit by bit, without them noticing.

But still, she'd finally made a bit of progress. From here on out would be the time to show off her technical skills, not her acting skills. But what first: the remote control or the TV itself? Starting work on the cable might even be an option.

Less than five minutes after Shadow Gale started to put a plan together in her mind, she heard metallic sounds coming down the stairs, and the door opened.

The armor was standing there carrying a cardboard box. Shadow Gale peered inside to find a game console from about two generations back plus a bunch of games.

"Ohhh right. True, I could play some games. All right. Hooking that up is easy, so…"

She'd never thought she would wind up playing video games in a place like this. But not doing that would make her look suspicious, so then she had no choice but to do it. Hooking it up, she turned on the power for the TV and the console. With the armor watching her intently, she had no chance for any modifying during this process.

Mashing the START button, Shadow Gale skipped the opening video.

If she'd played this game back in elementary school, she'd have mocked the bad graphics, cheap music, the kind of difficulty level that made it so you couldn't tell what the target age range was, the incomprehensible story, and various other things. She figured she would probably have dropped the game with a blithe remark like *"Only old farts enjoy retro games. To a young person playing it now, it may as well be just some shitty game."*

But giving it a shot now, this game was surprisingly interesting. She came to think that the graphics and music had their own sort of charm. A high school girl wasn't an old fart, but she was fairly adult compared with an elementary schooler.

But as to whether it was fun, the answer was no. This situation was just too awful to be playing games. Even without turning around to look back, she could tell the armor was right behind her. She never heard the sound of the door opening and closing, and

occasionally, she heard metal scraping. The armor was right behind her, watching her play the game.

Simple electronic noises sounded in the room. You wouldn't see glaring red flashing in modern games. While slowly learning the mechanics, Shadow Gale made her way through the game. It was of the simple action variety, but playing it sometimes made her think, *Oh, this might have a fair amount of depth.* She seemed to recall this game had a bunch of sequels. It had to have been popular because it was interesting, after all. The only problem was the situation.

The armor was watching. Shadow Gale could feel her gaze. Her back prickled painfully.

If she was staying here with Shadow Gale because she was wary of her magic, then she wouldn't have given Shadow Gale the TV or console in the first place, would she? No kidnapper would hand her smartphone over to someone they had kidnapped and imprisoned because the prisoner said she was bored. If the armor knew it would be used as a weapon, she wouldn't have handed it over in the first place. And to manage her boredom, the armor could have given her a manga magazine, a puzzle, or a book of chess problems—there were any number of pastimes that didn't use electricity.

In other words, this wasn't out of caution. So then what other sort of reason could there be?

A memory popped into Shadow Gale's head.

It had to have been around elementary school. Remembering now all the things she had done and thought then, she felt like she'd been quite the cheeky brat, but perhaps because there had been another far worse brat close at hand, she also felt like she might have been within a normal range.

Mamori had been playing a video game in her room. It had been an action game that game magazines had been buzzing about at the time, saying people were crowding to preorder it. Controller in hand for one hour, two, she forgot the passage of time as she continued playing, and without realizing it, Kanoe had come up behind her.

Sitting daintily on the bed, she'd watched Mamori play the game. Since Mamori had been in elementary school that meant Kanoe would also have been in elementary school at the time, but there had been an abnormal intensity to her gaze that had kept Mamori from concentrating on the game anymore, and she wasted lives pointlessly on stupid little mistakes.

At the time, Mamori had interpreted it like this:

Kanoe wanted to play the game, so she was pressuring her to "*Hurry up and give it over*."

When Mamori had said, with all the sarcasm she could muster, "If you want to play, then take it," handing over the controller, Kanoe had shaken her head, saying she didn't want to do it. But then when Mamori kept playing the game, the pressure coming from behind had kept her from playing decently.

When she tried to give it over, she was refused.

When she tried to play the game, she felt pressured.

Even when she suggested, "How about I quit the game and we do something else?" Kanoe shook her head.

What other choices were there? If she was to ask Kanoe directly, "What do you want to do, miss?" she surely wouldn't take it well.

Elementary school Mamori had considered. Just what did Kanoe want out of her? What did Kanoe want her to do? What would be the right choice of action? She thought and thought, and in the end, she didn't even understand anything herself anymore, and selecting "*It doesn't even matter anymore*" had been the right choice. That was how it had been then.

What about now? This situation did indeed resemble that time.

Shadow Gale closed her eyes for a while. After thirty seconds of slow counting, she opened her eyes. When she quietly turned to look behind her, the armor was still there.

Shadow Gale picked up the second controller and offered it to the armor. "If you want, why don't we play co-op?"

Bringing up one knee with a rattle, the armor stood. It approached Shadow Gale, bent over, took the controller from her, and sat down beside her.

Can it play video games…?

This concern was proven groundless immediately after starting, when the armor went from a hidden warp into a bonus stage.

CHAPTER 5
GOOD-BYE, MY FRIEND

◇ **Bluebell Candy**

Bluebell Candy had no real reason for continuing to be a magical girl.

It wasn't like she had any ambitions, goals, or aspirations. She lacked any principles or opinions. She was vague about philosophy, and it wasn't as if she had particularly powerful admiration for magical girls, either.

She'd heard there were quite a lot of magical girls like this. As the magical girl who had become Bluebell's mentor had lamented, "So many magical girls keep it up because it's the path of least resistance," and she'd finished off by telling her she should not become that kind of magical girl.

And in the end, that's exactly who Bluebell had become.

Whether you could become a magical girl or not was decided based off the vague standard of "magical talent." Being decided based on something so vague, Bluebell thought, perhaps it was unsurprising that plenty of people with vague directionality would wind up as magical girls.

But what had happened after that was unusual.

Bluebell, who wasn't any good at hand-to-hand combat, whose magic was just producing candies, who was only average when it came to office work, and who didn't really have any other special skills, had been assigned to the Research and Development Department and become a salaried magical girl.

Not so long ago, the word "salaryman" had described an ordinary phenomenon and not a profession to aspire to. But now, to the temp workers who dreamed of how nice it would be to get a

full-time job, salarymen were not ordinary at all but the elite.

And among magical girls, too, those who got a salary were the elite. You had to have a unique magic or connections with higher-ups—something like that—or you wouldn't be put on salary.

Bluebell had become a magical girl for no real reason and had become a salary earner for no real reason. Just like how she couldn't remember how she'd managed to become a magical girl, she also didn't remember how she'd managed to become a salary earner.

Every day, she commuted to the R&D building, where she sorted documents and performed errands and other sorts of odd jobs, doing the kind of work you didn't even have to be a magical girl to do, baffled all the while as to how she'd come to be salaried until half a year had passed and she had met Princess Deluge.

She'd heard of Princess Deluge's origins.

She didn't have to ask to realize Deluge was hurting on the inside.

Even Bluebell, who had just sort of wound up a magical girl without having a conscious goal, knew that magical girls were supposed to be useful to others, at times like these.

She wanted to encourage Princess Deluge.

She wanted to cheer up Princess Deluge.

She wanted to help Princess Deluge smile brightly.

Bluebell stayed by Princess Deluge's side constantly. When Deluge was sad, she would give her a candy; if there was something Deluge wanted, she would offer it to her. She would show Deluge the things she wanted to see and take her the places she wanted to go.

A lot of things were difficult or fundamentally impossible, with Bluebell's level of authority, but being one of the regular staff who commuted to the R&D building, she also knew where the card keys were and the pass numbers her superiors often used. Bluebell had given Deluge whatever she wanted, and Deluge had prepared carefully before causing this mess.

Had Deluge intended to use Bluebell, all along?

Or had Deluge become inclined to do that because Bluebell had presented her with the opportunity and the means?

Deluge was completely different now from the time when she'd been stricken by sadness. She was searching for the card soldiers, trying to hunt them all down.

She looked like an incarnation of vengeance, burning with rage. But the truth was, she was very unstable. Bluebell knew that. That was why she couldn't abandon Deluge. There was probably no going back anymore for Deluge. And it was the same for Bluebell. She couldn't go back now.

Maybe Deluge lacked self-awareness in this area, and maybe she'd get angry at Bluebell and tell her, "*I don't need your meddling.*" But Bluebell was with her because she wanted to protect her. If Bluebell wasn't there, Deluge would do something even more extreme. It was because Bluebell was there that Deluge was only doing this much.

She could empathize with Deluge. If Bluebell was in the same position, having been deceived and with her friends murdered, Bluebell would have surely also wanted to get revenge. But even so, she would feel awful if she couldn't at least leave Deluge the room to be able to go back.

Someone had once said magical girls existed to help people in trouble. Right now, Deluge was in trouble. That was why Bluebell would follow her.

◇ Princess Deluge

When she attacked the card soldiers as they fled her, she saw Tempest in them.

When she attacked the card soldiers that stood up to her, she saw Inferno in them.

When she attacked the card soldiers that tried to protect the others, she saw Quake in them.

When she witnessed a heart card soldier hiding in the shadows, trembling with her back toward Deluge, she started to see Cherry in her, but that thought quickly evaporated. Cherry hadn't been trembling as she was killed. Though she could have escaped, she'd come back. She'd fought boldly and been killed.

Fixing her trident's aim, Deluge couldn't attack. Seeing the back facing her, trembling because she was trying to hide, Deluge's aim wavered. Her breathing went ragged, and her field of vision narrowed. She felt like she would forget what she was trying to do now, what she was doing.

"Let's stop this, Deluge," a voice called to her from behind.

Her body moved reflexively.

Her trident pierced straight through the heart card soldier from behind. Despite how many she'd killed so far, the sensation was rawer than ever before.

She breathed out. Then in.

She froze the wound before any blood could spray out, pulling out her trident the instant before it hardened. The heart soldier collapsed without a cry, and her body crumbled apart, blowing away in the wind as it disappeared.

Last time, when they'd all fought the card soldiers in the lab, the card soldiers had left bodies after being killed. They had only finally disappeared once it was time for the full set to be revived. The bodies of the card soldiers she was fighting now disappeared when they were killed. They were different from those Deluge had fought before. But that didn't mean she could forgive them.

Though she'd come to this town to search for Premium Sachiko, once Deluge had discovered Shufflin here, she'd forgotten herself and attacked. Stealing Premium Sachiko would be a heavier blow to the Osk Faction than destroying a whole lot of Shufflins. Her "friend" had said as much, too. Deluge knew that. She did, but when she saw a Shufflin, she just couldn't stop herself.

Deluge turned back and glared at the magical girl who had spoken to her. "I thought I told you not to follow me if you're going to get in my way."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to… You just seemed like you were suffering."

"Could you not make assumptions about how I feel?"

"Sorry…but…"

"I'll say it one more time: If you're going to get in my way, then please leave."

Tearing her gaze from Bluebell, she faced forward.

Looking at Bluebell was painful. Even though Bluebell didn't resemble them at all, Tempest's face, Quake's face, Inferno's face, Cherry's face would flicker up and then disappear. If Deluge had really wanted to make Bluebell go away, she could have left her behind, but she just couldn't quite push her away, so she let her follow. Though she used harsh language and treated her unkindly, she felt relieved that Bluebell followed.

Grabbing onto some Demon Wings, Deluge climbed into the sky. Bluebell also grabbed some Demon Wings to follow. Seeing

that, Deluge sighed, then felt angry with herself for it.

She encouraged herself to not forget.

Quake, who'd tried to protect Tempest and had been beheaded. Tempest then cried and yelled, begging for mercy, but it was no use—she, too, was beheaded. Inferno's final attack hadn't even hit the enemy and left her to die in regret. Cherry, who Deluge had thought of as a coward and a poor fighter, had nonetheless plucked up the courage to return to the laboratory, where she'd continued to use her magic to support her allies until her dying breath.

None of their deaths had been acceptable. None of their murders had been acceptable. It hadn't been okay for any of them to just get used, get taken advantage of, and then thrown away when they were done. They'd all given everything they had trying to become magical girls. They had fought without ever knowing they'd been tricked into believing they had to fight to save the world from destruction.

Filru had been killed because she'd shown mercy to the enemy. If she hadn't had the kindness to show consideration to the heart card soldiers, Filru would not have died.

Deluge couldn't die until she'd gotten revenge for them all—until she could get even. So until the moment she would be allowed to die, she would abandon kindness. She didn't know if she'd ever even had such a thing to begin with. Nami Aoki had been someone who would adapt to her surroundings, go along with the flow, and be fine with it all as long as she was okay. When her friend had been bullied, she hadn't tried to help her, because it had been clear that trying would worsen her own situation.

The weak smile of her friend who had stopped coming to school rose in her mind, and she shook it off. That wasn't something to be thinking about right now.

If she'd never had kindness from the start, that was convenient. If she lacked kindness, the enemy couldn't take advantage of her.

Deluge stared at Bluebell, who was watching her with concern. Deluge's chest ached. She was suffocating. She put her hand to her chest and squeezed. She was breathing harder.

"Deluge, here…"

Deluge snatched the medicine Bluebell offered her in a tight grip, swallowing it down without looking at Bluebell. It replenished her energy. She could still fight, but she was taking medicine more frequently. Even Deluge didn't know just how long she could fight

without a break.

There was no contact through the headset. She'd told the others to immediately inform her when they discovered card soldiers, but they were offering less information of sightings—perhaps because the enemy numbers had decreased.

So then she had to find them herself. She'd never planned to rely on Pfle's subordinates in the first place. She sent the Demon Wings out all over the city as reconnaissance, reporting to her if they discovered magical girls. The Demon Wings were low-intelligence, so she couldn't make them search for Sachiko only.

But she didn't care.

She was going to kill the card soldiers. She was going to kill the whole Osk Faction, not leaving a single one alive.

Deploying the Demon Wings, she had them monitor from high above. If they found any card soldiers, Deluge would go to them. She'd kill them.

The truth was it would be better if Bluebell weren't there. Bluebell should not be there. The moment this thought hit her, she told Bluebell, "I want you to go."

But Bluebell wouldn't go away. Terrified, she cried and trembled, but still kept following her the whole time. "I won't go!" "I'll always be by your side!" she said as she refused to leave Deluge. And hearing these things, Deluge was relieved from the bottom of her heart.

An image of Prism Cherry kept coming into her head, but she erased it from her mind. There was only one Prism Cherry. No—had been one. There was not even one now. Deluge knew the reason Prism Cherry was now gone. Remembering made the flames at the depths of her heart spark and blaze high. This was not embers. It was a raging fire.

After some time, the Demon Wings she'd scattered in the air notified her that they had discovered a magical girl. Burning with rage, Deluge came running, but when she saw this magical girl surrounded by Demon Wings, her anger turned to confusion, and confusion to irritation. She waffled for a moment between descending or ignoring her, but in the end, she decided to come down. Upon landing in front of the magical girl, her irritation built even more when Deluge discovered the girl was smiling.

"What are you here for?" She vented her irritation at the girl, not at all hiding it, but the girl's smile never faltered.

“It seems we’ve wound up in a situation where we must cooperate in earnest. By the way, who is that with you? I would appreciate an introduction,” said Pfle, smiling all the while.

◇ Micchan the Dictionary

Not even a single demon was left. The barrage of shuriken and kunai had pierced their wings, cut off their heads, and sliced open their bodies, felling them one after another, until before she knew it, the enemy’s attacks were focusing solely on Micchan the Dictionary. But that was fine. Privately, she was grateful that they’d taken the heat off her even temporarily.

A shuriken had sliced open the skin on the left side of her head. It hadn’t gone to the bone, but blood was flowing toward her ear, blocked from going in by her earplug. Just this alone was no problem. It was a small mercy her legs hadn’t been injured.

“*Shoujuu* [rifle] to *ryoujuu* [shotgun].”

Her rifle was out of ammo, so she transformed it into a shotgun. She used its wide spray to fell all the shuriken flying at her.

There was still Glassianne, Dark Cutie, Deluge, and some more winged demons left. But they alone wouldn’t be enough. Even with all those people on the team, they still needed Micchan. This was not overconfidence or an excess of self-consciousness on her part.

Glassianne devoted herself purely to reconnaissance, which was probably what made her hold back, and she had an extreme tendency to avoid intruding. Dark Cutie could be motivated by impulses that were difficult for others to understand, and someone else needed to hold the reins. Micchan didn’t think they could fully trust Deluge and Bluebell, whom they’d only just met that day. And Pfle was not on the scene.

So they needed Micchan, no matter what, after all.

—I can’t let myself die here.

The enemy continued to throw shuriken as she ran without looking behind her, and Micchan shot down the shuriken, racing in pursuit. As Micchan set the demons on the enemy, she closed the distance bit by bit but got wounded in the process.

They flew down the mountain road until the area opened up into fields and farm roads. There was a metal drum with smoke hanging over it. A truck was parked by the side of the road, but

there were no people around. Micchan kept pulling the shotgun's trigger until she'd used up its remaining ammo, shooting down shuriken and kunai. When she ran out, she tossed the gun away, stripping off her white coat in the same motion, brandishing it in her right hand as she slid to the ground. Maintaining speed, she rolled forward and bounded to her feet again, waving her white coat to swipe down the shuriken.

She'd finally gotten this far. It was just 150 feet between her and the enemy—close enough the enemy would stop and face her. The cost had been great, but getting this close was worth it.

As Micchan had predicted from the enemy's weapons, her motif was a ninja. A large scar sealed her left eye. Her left sleeve swayed in the wind, indicating nothing was inside. One eye and one arm. The enemy threw kunai and shuriken one after another with only one hand. Though having one eye should have affected her depth perception, her aim was precise.

The way her shuriken moved was different now, compared with before revealing herself. Earlier, she'd just kept raining down shuriken from a super-long distance. Now that she'd exposed herself, the shuriken moved irregularly. They would fly in a straight line, then suddenly change trajectory to aim for vitals from blind angles. Or three shuriken thrown in succession would hit at the same instant from completely different angles.

The enemy had stopped right here, choosing to attack with full strength even if it meant abandoning her own safety. She intended to settle the match now.

—Fine by me.

Micchan waved her white coat, then tucked the mess that was left of it into a pocket to hold up a rock in her palm. "*Ishi* [stone] to *ita* [board]."

She turned this rock she'd gotten from the roadside into a three-foot-squared board that was eight inches thick. When the shuriken flew at her, they pierced it with a thud.

"*Ita* [board] to *nata* [hatchet]." She transformed the board into a hatchet.

Wielding the hatchet that was big enough to cover her upper body, Micchan knocked down the shuriken. The enemy's projectiles came for her via trajectories that ignored the laws of physics. They'd bend at right angles or suddenly come straight for her after drawing a parabola, moving like whimsical creatures.

"*Nata* [hatchet] to *nawa* [rope]." While approaching the enemy, she changed her weapon to rope. The closer she got to her opponent, the harder the shuriken came, the faster the pace of throwing. Now the hatchet was too heavy for Micchan to wield one-handed. She swung the rope like a whip, knocking down the shuriken, knocking down the kunai, and dodging three more kunai at the last instant.

"*Nawa* [rope] to *iwa* [boulder]." She turned the rope into a giant boulder and left it there, using it as a shield against the kunai that warped their trajectories to come at her from behind. Micchan pulled out the pin of a hand grenade with her right hand and threw it behind her, while with her left, she slid off her necktie, saying, "*Tai* [necktie] to *tako* [kite]."

The grenade exploded behind her, fanning Micchan with the wind of its blast. The giant magical kite she made from her necktie lifted up on the blast of wind, rising over sixty feet in the air at a forty-degree angle, evading the aim of the shuriken and kunai.

"*Kaito* [kite] to *kaika* [flame]." Without the kite to keep her up, she started to fall. She put the flame in her hand to the tassel of her scholar's cap, setting it on fire. Doing this enabled her to keep one tool while leaving her hands open. Putting her freed right hand in her pocket, she pulled out the final metal scrap of those she'd used earlier to stop the car.

"*Teppen* [iron scrap] to *teppeki* [iron wall]."

As Micchan fell, before her eyes appeared a thick and sturdy metal wall. She and the wall fell at the same speed as the wall repelled shuriken and kunai.

She pulled the ragged white coat out of her pocket. "*Boro* [rag] to *bou* [staff]." With her rag-turned-quarterstaff, Micchan struck away the many shuriken that warped around the wall to come flying at her. These attacks around the wall hadn't been properly aimed. Micchan's hypothesis that the ninja couldn't strike with precision unless she saw the opponent was probably 90 percent correct. This much, she could fight off. The ground was coming closer. Setting her feet against the wall, Micchan repelled all the shuriken and kunai that were flying at her one after another.

Micchan landed with the wall, shaking the ground. She softened the impact with a forward roll, maintaining her momentum to fly at the enemy.

"*Bou* [staff] to *boku* [ink]." She splashed the ninja with ink, but

the ninja avoided it with a nimble step back, throwing a shuriken as if she were dancing.

"*Boku* [ink] to *taku* [table]." Micchan swung the table around to knock down the shuriken, then with the table over her shoulder, charged at the ninja. If her opponent still tried to put distance between them, then Micchan had options, too. They were no longer in the mountains, where there was lots of cover; there was nowhere to hide in a field like this.

"*Taku* [table] to *aku* [lye]." Her right hand cupped a handful of lye while her left ripped a strip of cloth off her clothes.

"*Nuno* [cloth] to *ono* [ax]." Swinging around the ax in one hand, she knocked down the incoming projectiles. The one kunai that made it through a gap in her swipe, she blocked with her elbow. It wounded her, but not seriously. The ninja had four shuriken and kunai ready in hand for her next shots. The instant before she could fire them, Micchan pointed the lye at the ninja.

"*Rojuu* [bittern] to *kijuu* [machine gun]." This time, she created a machine gun, one too heavy for just a single person to carry. A human wouldn't even be able to shoot it properly if it wasn't secured. But a magical girl could, even while running around.

The ninja ran toward her, throwing shuriken as she simultaneously drew her katana. Micchan fired her weapon: The ninja dodged with a right step, then with a left, repelling another shot with her katana. Two steps, and the ninja was already within arm's reach.

The ninja had incredible agility as well as dynamic visual acuity, pulling off the circus-like feat of using her katana to block the bullets coming out of a magic heavy machine gun. But she'd paid a price to pull it off. Her block couldn't handle the force of the bullets, and her blade was sent flying high into the sky.

Bullets thudded into the planting field, making continuous explosions of dirt as the raised footpath between the fields was blasted up. The ninja stepped diagonally to avoid the muzzle of the machine gun, but her katana had been wrenched from her grip too forcefully. She was off-balance. Micchan let go of the machine gun. The two of them were too close for ranged weapons now. She shouldn't be using guns, but a simple weapon that could finish the enemy off swiftly. The machine gun had ultimately been just to motivate the enemy to come close. This ninja was a formidable foe who could take sweeping fire from a machine gun without the

twitch of an eyebrow. At a glance, Micchan could tell how strong she was.

Micchan held the handle of the hatchet in her mouth. She'd even mastered ventriloquism so she could speak with just a part of her mouth open.

"*Kaika* [flame] to *zaika* [coin]." The flame that had been burning on the tassel of her scholar's cap transformed into a coin.

"*Zaika* [coin] to *zairu* [rope]." The coin transformed into a climbing rope, which Micchan took in hand.

Smacking the shuriken, swiping the kunai, she whipped the climbing rope around in front of her to use it as a shield, then wrapped it around the enemy's legs. With her right leg trapped, the enemy drew a short sword, but she was too slow. Reeling her in, Micchan dashed up to her in one burst.

The enemy swung her short sword down on Micchan. Her slice was nimbler than Micchan had anticipated.

"*Nawa* [rope] to *nata* [hatchet]."

Freed from the restraint of the rope, the enemy lost her balance. The angle of her slice veered off, and Micchan barely dodged it. Her rebound swipe aimed for the end of Micchan's chin, but she blocked that with the hatchet.

The two blades clashed and creaked, breaking off a little shard of iron that flew away. Between the agility of that slice and the strength that was no lesser than Micchan's in a struggle of locked weapons, this was not a magical girl who purely focused on projectile weapons and attacked from a distance. She was pretty strong, even in a close-range fight. But Micchan was still going to win.

As their blades were locked, Micchan gently touched her fingertip to the dull side of the blade the enemy pressed toward her.

"*Katana* [blade] to *kanna* [plane]."

Against the will of its owner, the katana she'd been pressing at Micchan transformed into a carpenter's plane. No magical girl would predict something like this in a fight. The equilibrium of force between hatchet and katana broke, and when the ninja magical girl fell forward, Micchan drove her knee up into her gut, then slammed the handle of the hatchet into her backbone to send her to the ground. The plane tool flew out of the ninja's hands. When she tried to get up, Micchan swung her hatchet at her—but then she felt a shock in her right hand and smothered a cry.

The back of Micchan's right hand had been crushed, and she could see white bone. She quickly understood what had happened. A geta was flying away, drawing a string of blood in its wake. While lying on her face, the ninja had bent her leg like a scorpion's tail to throw her shoe, smacking it into the back of Micchan's hand.

Micchan clenched her teeth around the handle of the hatchet in her mouth.

"*Nata* [hatchet] to *futa* [lid]!"

She judged that her right hand was unusable. This hatchet was made a little too heavy to wield in her left hand only. Using the pot lid, Micchan smacked down the other geta, then grappled with the ninja as she tried to get to her feet.

The enemy fired a kunai, but Micchan was faster. Firmly grasping the red scarf that fluttered in the wind, she yanked it close to her. The ninja's white throat came into range of her hatchet.

The ninja pursed her lips, and Micchan thrust out her forehead. She felt a tiny prick there. The ninja had waited for the moment Micchan's face had come close to spit a needle from her mouth. Being a ninja, she really did pull every single move. But it really seemed there would be no more.

Micchan pressed her forehead, with the needle stuck in it, into the ninja's jaw, putting her body weight into it. She sat on the ninja, keeping her from moving her lower body. She'd lost the grip strength in her right hand, but it wasn't like she couldn't use her arm. Using her elbow, she strangled the ninja with her red scarf while she used her left hand to hold down the ninja's right arm. The handle of her hatchet was slick with spit as she pushed it hard into her jaw.

The well-sharpened blade of the hatchet neared the ninja's throat.

A fierce spray of blood. Her scholar's cap and the ninja's costume were dirtied by the dark-red fluid.

Micchan's eyes widened as she saw something unbelievable. The point of a katana extended from her chest. The hatchet came away from her mouth. A thread of mixed blood and saliva extended from it. The ninja knocked her aside, and Micchan weakly rolled over the ground. She couldn't fight it. She touched the point of the katana with her hand, but it was slippery with blood, and she couldn't get a grip on it.

—This katana…

It wasn't the short sword—that weapon had been turned into the plane tool. This one was longer; it was the katana the ninja had been using earlier. The machine gun's fire had shot another katana high into the sky and Micchan hadn't seen where it landed.

It hadn't been knocked aside. The ninja had made it look as if her katana had been bashed out of her grip, while she'd actually thrown it high into the air. She'd gone so far as losing her balance and leaving herself open to commit to pretending it had been knocked away in an attempt to trick Micchan.

—Damn it…

More than having been tricked, Micchan was frustrated that the ninja had blocked the fire of the machine gun with ease. Through her clouding vision, Micchan could see the ninja getting to her feet. Micchan couldn't get up. The gesture of the ninja raising up her kunai looked strangely slow.

◇ Fal

The three of them ran from alley to alley, choosing roads that wouldn't draw attention. With Snow White in the lead, Sachiko next, and Uluru as rear guard, they ran as fast as they could without ever stopping.

"Magical girl detected! Behind us, pon!"

Uluru drew her gun and spun around, and Snow White passed by her side to strike the enemy with her weapon, Ruler. The demon used its square wing as a shield to block Snow White's attack, but when it tried to push back, she evaded its shove, and it lost its balance, when without missing a beat, Uluru smacked it with the stock of her gun. Its face crushed, the black shadow weakly fell to the ground.

"That's not the one I meant, pon!"

The magical girl that only Fal had been able to detect appeared before them in less than a second. The magical girl in black who'd fought with Snow White in the amusement park came rushing up the alley.

Sachiko cried out and tried to run the other way, but when she saw the shadow hound that ran along that side, she let out another cry.

It was Dark Cutie. A shadow extended from her hand to run

along the wall and execute a pincer attack with her main body. The shadow bared its teeth at Sachiko and howled like a dog. Fal figured out how their location had been discovered. That was a hunting dog. It had picked up on their smell to follow them, trailing them from the amusement park to their hiding place under the bridge.

The hound snapped at Sachiko, who made a desperate attempt to dodge but tripped over her own feet and landed on the concrete. The hound took advantage of its superior position to snap at her. Uluru punched at it from the side with her gun, but the hound's fangs seized her weapon. Dark Cutie moved soundlessly through the shadow to circle around behind Uluru, swinging up a knife-hand, and Snow White swung Ruler in a wide sweep. Dark Cutie pressed herself against the wall to evade, but the hound failed to dodge, and with a yip, it was sliced in half and melted away.

Scooping up Sachiko in her arms, Uluru yelled, "Surrender! Or you'll die!"

The enemy didn't stop. It was as if she couldn't hear it at all. She stayed out of Ruler's range, creating shadow weapons like whips and spears, and her hands never stopped attacking. Snow White smacked aside every attack—not just the ones aimed at her but also the attacks on Uluru and Sachiko.

"Uluru can kill all of you solo, you know!"

Dark Cutie paid it no mind.

"Look behind you! There's an ambush coming for you!"

She was completely ignoring her.

Snow White repelled the blade that ran along the wall toward her. On the other side of the alley, she could see the sunset. The enemy's magic made use of shadows to create weapons and animals. This opponent having the sun at her back was no laughing matter.

Uluru hesitated but then ran, pulling Sachiko's hand. The sound of her footsteps grew distant. Snow White jumped off the wall of a high-rise, then set her foot on a windowsill on the opposite side, kicking away the shadow blade that reached up at her from below as she headed for the rooftop.

Dark Cutie didn't pursue Uluru, going after Snow White instead. She threw a shadow rope along the wall, her shadow hook getting a firm hold on the rooftop fence. She only needed about half the time Snow White did to climb up to the roof.

◇ Princess Deluge

Being new models, the Demon Wings' abilities were greatly enhanced compared with older Disrupters. With their added flying ability, they were as fast as a magical girl; they were stable, and they could even engage in high-speed acrobatic flight.

Deluge had flown in the past, before getting the Demon Wings. Princess Tempest had invited her out, holding her under her arms to go for a walk in the sky. Deluge had been completely unstable and spent the whole time being scared she would fall, but it wound up being a good memory. Inferno had looked genuinely concerned when Deluge told her about it: "You seem levelheaded, but you can be reckless, Deluge."

She didn't have the time for basking in sentimentality and memories like that.

Deluge grabbed hold of some Demon Wings to zoom through the air, tearing through the clouds. Her special abilities included being resistant to snow and ice, so flying at high altitudes was no problem for her.

She dialed a number, and finding there was still no answer, she tucked her magical phone away.

Her "friend" had called Pfle a schemer and a liar.

It wasn't that she trusted what said "friend" said 100 percent. That "friend" only thought of her as someone to use, and they would understand that Deluge felt the same way. Neither of them thought well of the other; they were just together for convenience's sake. This "friend" only communicated with Deluge by periodically leaving messages on her bed out of the blue or periodically a piece of paper; how much could Deluge trust someone like that? No one else would likely trust them, she figured. It was only after Deluge had gained substantiation for the information the "friend" had brought her—the existence of figures above Shufflin and Grim Heart, the quarrel among the Three Sages, the ceremony, the deaths of her friends, and other such things—that she'd finally come to be able to trust them to a degree.

Even with all this, it was just "a degree." This was exactly why she didn't trust them fully. But she thought their evaluation of Pfle may have been correct. When she actually met Pfle, she understood.

She had traits similar to the old Nami Aoki, only bigger, stronger, tougher, and sketchier.

Her coming to W City with no advance notice to see Deluge was also very fishy.

"Things have gotten quite serious," said Pfle. "Now doesn't seem like the time to be searching for Premium Sachiko."

"Do you even understand your own position?" Deluge replied.

"It's precisely because of our cooperation that I came here to advise you. Why would I go out just to trick or deceive you? I could do something like that without coming all the way here."

"I have my own goals. If stealing Premium Sachiko will harm the Osk Faction, then that's all I'm going to do."

"Nothing good will come of growing stubborn. There's something more important I want to request of you. Could you confirm if Shadow Gale is safe?"

Was she trying to push through with a bluff? Deluge glared at Pfle, but Pfle coolly ignored it as she continued.

"The hostage is important to me, and to you as well, I assume. Given our shared values, wouldn't you consider it wise to check?"

Deluge glared at her for a bit, but Pfle just kept saying "Contact them," and "I'm not trying to deceive you," and made no move to budge or leave.

"If this is a groundless fear or misunderstanding on my part, then that's fine. You may laugh at my foolishness. In the case that it's no mistake or false impression on my part, then this is a grave issue. Listen, Deluge, it wouldn't be so much effort for you, would it? There's no risk, either. And there is merit in it, too. You won't have me following you about anymore. That's quite the benefit, isn't it? Don't you feel like you want to give it a shot?"

The option of leaving Pfle behind crossed Deluge's mind. But then she thought next, wouldn't Pfle try to meet her through Dark Cutie or Glassianne? Pfle was the type to do something like that.

Deluge weighed whether there really were no disadvantages to this offer before concluding that there were not.

It would indeed be beneficial to have this annoying magical girl go away. She did have the feeling that she was being taken for a ride, but she didn't want any further irritation.

"Are you all right, Deluge?" Bluebell asked.

"I'm fine."

"Good evening," Pfle greeted Bluebell. "I'm Deluge's friend."

“Oh yes, I’m a friend of hers, too.”

While those two were doing this strange self-introduction, Deluge pulled out her magical phone. She dialed the number of the hideout where Shadow Gale was locked up, then waited for a while.

…They’re not picking up?

It couldn’t be that there was no one at the hideout. Deluge had arranged for the three of them to take turns keeping watch on Shadow Gale. If it were only Demon Wings, they probably wouldn’t be able to pick up the phone, but Deluge ensured there would be at least two magical girls stationed there.

She dialed again. No answer.

One more time. No answer.

“Any word?”

Deluge glared (albeit not so pointedly) at Pfle and her smug, self-satisfied face. “Bluebell, a candy.”

“Right.”

She sucked on a candy and soon felt better.

“Is that your magic? You make candies?” asked Pfle.

“Yes, the candies that I make—”

“I’m going,” interrupted Deluge.

“Huh? Where?” asked Bluebell. “I’ll go, too!”

“You don’t have to follow me. More importantly, keep watch on that magical girl.”

“Huh? Keep watch on her?”

“Don’t listen to her, no matter what she says. And you don’t need to answer her, either.”

“That’s quite the awful treatment.”

“I’ll be right back if this turns out to be nothing. If anything happens, call my magical phone.” After instructing Bluebell so emphatically not to follow her, Deluge was not going to actively use her. If she let Bluebell get involved, then even she would have no place to return to. Deluge had thought it would be best to let her get involved in a way that would enable her to excuse herself somewhat afterward.

But the situation wouldn’t allow for that. She didn’t have the time, either.

Deluge hadn’t told anyone about her hideout. She had three magical girls, including Armor Arlie, and countless Demon Wings stationed there. Even if they had been attacked by forces capable of breaking through, it was unthinkable that there wouldn’t even be

time for them to contact Deluge.

An accident had occurred. She had to go see what had happened, or she wouldn't know.

Lifted off by Demon Wings under both arms, Deluge jumped into flight.

The Demon Wings descended gradually. Emerging from the clouds, she could see the lights of the buildings below.

What had happened? Had Pfle known? Deluge hadn't bothered asking since she had the feeling Pfle would dodge the question. Deluge pulled a tablet of her drug from its case and put it in her mouth.

◇ Glassianne

Micchan the Dictionary had died. Glassianne thought she'd accounted for such a possible outcome, but now that it had actually happened, it felt nigh impossible. She couldn't calm down at all, not in the slightest, not one bit. Her heart was pounding out of her chest.

Before she knew it, she was sighing, and though she continued searching for enemies, she felt like her concentration was flagging. She couldn't do her job like this; nothing about any of this was good.

The ninja who had killed Micchan had disappeared like smoke. When Glassianne had seen Micchan's struggle, she'd requested backup from Deluge, but by the time she had arrived, the fight had been over.

Glassianne lifted her head.

Bringing her mouth close to the headset, she just about told Dark Cutie that Micchan had been killed, but after some consideration, she brought her hand away again. Dark Cutie was in the middle of a fight with Snow White. Judging from how she'd left the fleeing Premium Sachiko to go face Snow White, it seemed she'd lost her head. Dark Cutie would get like this, from time to time. Whenever she'd gotten like that in the past, Micchan the Dictionary would act as the proxy leader. Now that Micchan was gone, however, Glassianne could not fill that role.

So now what am I gonna do?

She could no longer focus purely on reconnaissance. But being specialized in this area, Glassianne couldn't do anything else. She was a specialist, not a generalist.

Dark Cutie was now a horse with a carrot dangling in front of her nose. What would be the point of reporting to her that Micchan had been killed when she was already worked up to begin with? At the very least, Glassianne doubted it would work to their advantage.

For now, she would back up Dark Cutie. It would be best to leave Sachiko and Uluru to others. Glassianne made up her mind. She would contact Princess Deluge and tell her that Micchan had been killed by the ninja magical girl and that Uluru and Sachiko had escaped and have her bump up the level of alert of the demons on watch around the estate. That seemed like a good idea.

Glassianne switched over her headset, connecting to Deluge. "Miss Deluge, this is Glassianne. Premium Sachiko and Uluru have escaped. Please raise the level of alert of the demons stationed around the estate. Dark Cutie is currently in combat with Snow White. Location: the roof of the Kamihayashi building in block four of the Kuna district. Requesting backup there, as well. And one more thing—Micchan the Dictionary was killed by a ninja magical girl. I believe it's the same enemy who was throwing shuriken and kunai at us in the amusement park."

"Oh-ho… Someone killed Micchan the Dictionary, hmm?"

Startled, Glassianne removed the headset, bringing it away from her face to look at it. It was still a headset—nothing had changed. She put it on again and said, "…Hello?"

"Whatever is the matter, Glassianne? Your voice sounds farther away now."

She hadn't been mishearing, after all. "…Boss? Why are you on the line?"

"I was just meeting with Deluge myself. I had her tell me about the situation in W City. Thanks to her kind, careful, and thorough explanation, now I have a general grasp on things. After all, I wouldn't understand any of it since I wasn't there myself."

"Right…"

"In any case, there's been a slight change of plans. There's no need to kidnap Premium Sachiko."

"Pardon?"

"We withdraw. We'll meet at the previously decided location.

Could you inform Dark Cutie as well? I'm busy with things on my end."

"What? I mean, pardon?"

"Am I understood?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am."

This exchange only created more questions for Glassianne. But she had her orders from the boss.

So what was going to happen now? If things weren't going to work out at present, then the situation had to be pretty desperate. Glassianne prayed for Micchan to watch over her from heaven—but then it hit her that if Micchan were anywhere, she might actually be in hell. Glassianne corrected herself: *Watch over me from the other side, okay?*

Micchan had done quite a lot of bad things in life, so this prayer was more accurate. *Gee, I'm actually pretty quick-thinking!* Glassianne thought, patting herself on the back as she contacted Dark Cutie through the headset.

◇ **Dark Cutie**

If she was considering the mission, she should have pursued Sachiko. But Dark Cutie had let Sachiko get away and let her feet take her up to the top of the high-rise instead. She felt as if she had been invited there.

This magical girl was named Snow White.

The name gave you a sense of purity and beauty—it was a name appropriate to a heroine. It excited her.

She was also called the Magical-Girl Hunter. Kind of a scary title for a heroine, more like a villain's, if anything. But since Snow White got that title because she was purported to catch bad magical girls, in terms of behavior, it was unmistakably associated with the heroic side.

She was affiliated with the Inspection Department, and there were no lack of those who called her their top ace.

The flower decorations scattered all over her white costume, as if indicating purity, were beautiful, and her school uniform motif, with its armband and such, made you think of positions like a committee chair or a member of the disciplinary committee. It was a perfect fit for a girl whose lifestyle was about cracking down on

evil.

As Snow White faced Dark Cutie, readying herself, Dark Cutie locked her in view, lowering her stance and tangling up each of her hands.

She could divine no emotions from Snow White's expression. She could sense no anger, joy, or sadness. She was quiet like a calm sea, with nothing peeking through the features on her face. The *naginata* weapon she had raised in an overhead position slowly lowered.

This was unsatisfactory. It would be appropriate for a heroine to feel anger toward evil or sadness at being forced to fight another magical girl—being expressionless was not good. A heroine should be filled with more emotion than anyone else, and she should show that in her expressions, without hiding it. Perhaps this was an imposition, but it was what Dark Cutie thought.

A villain would behave like a villain, and in order to fight like a villain, the heroine must behave like a heroine.

Restraining her right-hand hound for the moment, Dark Cutie made a fox with her left hand.

From the right-hand side, she set the hound at Snow White, while from her left, she sent the fox. She had them attack on auto, not giving them any detailed instructions so that it didn't matter if Snow White read her mind.

Snow White blocked the hound's attack with the handle of her *naginata* and kicked at the fox, but the fox swiftly twisted around to evade her counterattack. Dark Cutie lifted her leg high and transformed her leg's shadow into a winding whip, which she then snapped at Snow White. But before it could connect, Snow White backed up a step, and the whip only smacked the ground at her feet.

The whip's job was ultimately just to get in her way. Snow White could read her mind. It was best for Dark Cutie to assume she wasn't going to hit, attacking from outside the range of the *naginata*.

Snow White's evasion of the whip created the slightest opening. The hound snapped at the handle of the *naginata*, putting all its body weight into it as it tugged. The fox ran up the other side, snapping at her Achilles tendon, and there was a sharp sound as its fangs came together.

That was a metallic sound. What the fox's teeth had bitten into

was not Snow White's Achilles tendon.

—A fire extinguisher?

Snow White had withdrawn one hand from her two-handed grip on the *naginata* to pull a fire extinguisher from the bag at her waist and thrust it into the fox's mouth. And while she was at it, she slammed the fire extinguisher and the fox's head onto the roof a few times, sending concrete flying and scattering.

As Snow White attacked, Dark Cutie snapped her whip, but this time, Snow White dodged with a backflip. She twisted the *naginata* and her body at the same time, trying to peel the hound biting the handle of her *naginata* up from the floor. The shadow hound couldn't take it and released the handle from its mouth, but an instant later, the *naginata* sliced the hound in half, and it melted away and disappeared.

Having dealt with the two beasts, Snow White landed lightly and picked up the fire extinguisher.

With her *naginata*, she lopped off the shadow spear that flew toward her next, then repelled the shadow whip with its handle. Her reactions were good.

—Then how about this?

With her right hand, a snake, her left a wolf, her right leg a whip, and her left leg a scythe, Dark Cutie stood on her tiptoes and spun like a ballerina, showering her with whip strikes, while from the sides she deployed the sharp-fanged wolf and the snake with poison that could knock you out from just a scrape. Snow White shoved the extinguisher into the snake's mouth and avoided the wolf's fangs by jumping onto the fence, jumping again from there to avoid the whip while she used the handle of her *naginata* to block the follow-up strike from the scythe.

Snow White was still dealing with it all easily. Dark Cutie decided to add a little more.

Bending her neck to touch her shoulder, she made a cat shadow. Now with the snake, the cat struck in between wolf, spear, and whip, not even giving Snow White the time to exhale, she attacked. Concrete fragments flew, the iron fence bent and twisted, but even so, Snow White stood there without a single wound.

Dark Cutie smiled. She had the feeling she could hear a voice from her headset, but it seemed inconsequential; she didn't pay attention to what was being said.

Changing the wolf from her left hand into scissors, Dark Cutie

snipped off the hair decoration that kept her hair tied. Her hair, which was gathered into a shape like animal ears, fell over her face with a swish. At a glance, Dark Cutie looked like she had short hair, but when she undid this part, its original length was restored. With the characteristic thick, full hair of a magical girl, she could create shadows. Mussing up her hair, she created a capturing net with the silhouette.

With this move added to her continuous assault using the snake, wolf, cat, whip, spear, and net, she attacked Snow White. As the shadow puppets flung themselves at her, Snow White leaped, rolled, swept them aside, blocked and dodged them, running all over the roof, sometimes failing to dodge entirely and getting hit, but she carefully avoided any fatal wounds. At most, she got some bruises or shallow cuts.

Snow White kept on dodging, never making any move to strike back. She focused only on evasion, dealing with the storm of continuous attacks. It was a tightrope walk: Never mind half a step, half a toe's mistake would cost her life. Though this should have been giving her far worse than just a stomachache, her expression remained cool.

Wonderful. Dark Cutie was finally feeling cheery. Snow White was trying to buy time. She was trying to make herself a sacrificial pawn in order to let Sachiko and the other one get away. But even saying that, she likely didn't intend to die here. She was the sort of sacrificial pawn who would live and escape in the end.

Dark Cutie wound up to punch the ground. Pulling out a large piece of concrete, she lifted it up to eye level. Snow White was watching her, *naginata* raised. Dark Cutie then grabbed the chain-link fence with her left hand and ripped it out. With the concrete lump in her right hand and the fence in her left, she held both up to the deeply reddening light of the setting sun.

She could make shadow pictures with more than just her own body. If she used tools, she could make the shadows even bigger, heavier, stronger. Snow White had hopped all around the roof to evade her attacks, but if Dark Cutie's silhouettes got bigger, there would be fewer places to jump to.

Snow White must have picked up on Dark Cutie's intention, as she leaped to the top of the fence.

Naginata in her right hand, she gripped the nozzle of the fire extinguisher in her left. Dark Cutie wrapped the shadow rope

around the fence, yanking on it with all her strength to rapidly jet sideways and avoid a direct hit. But when the fire extinguisher's powder spread out over the whole roof, it blocked her field of vision.

Dark Cutie jumped back and got on top of the iron fence. The use of the fire extinguisher kept her from making shadows. Even if she were to try, they would be faint and be that much weaker.

Of course, it wasn't as if Dark Cutie had not thought up a way to deal with this. Since the enemy had been moving around holding a fire extinguisher, it was good manners as a villain to come up with a countermeasure for a fire extinguisher in the meantime. Dark Cutie said into her headset, "Anne, give me Snow White's position."

"Liiiisten! Like I've been telling you! Retreat! We're withdrawing!"

"…What?"

"You weren't listening at all, were you, Leader? I've been yelling myself hoarse! The boss contacted me earlier—we're withdrawing!"

"Ridiculous."

"No, *you're* ridiculous! Micchan is dead!"

"…I see. Then I'll eliminate Snow White so that I can withdraw safely."

"Listen, you…"

"Anne, give me Snow White's position."

"She ran down the road while scattering extinguisher powder, then disappeared."

"She disappeared?"

Gradually, the extinguisher powder cleared as the wind blew it away. Snow White was gone. Dark Cutie approached the edge of the roof and looked down and saw white powder leading through the back alley toward one of the main roads.

"I can't say for sure, but I think she returned to human form while she was hidden in the white powder and disappeared into the crowd. The road is full of students coming home from school and salarymen on the way back from work right now. They're all angry that some idiot used a fire extinguisher in a place like this."

Dark Cutie thought about Snow White.

The Magical Girl-Hunter had managed to completely evade Glassianne's glasses by pulling this move that spat in the face of the philosophy that it was amateur to undo your transformation on the

battlefield.

This way of fighting was not what Dark Cutie would call suitable for a heroine. But Dark Cutie wasn't opposed to using anything you could in life and just trying to survive. Cutie Altair had said something along those lines in episode twenty of *Cutie Healer Galaxy*:

"If you die now, then that's the end. If you survive, there's still a next time."

The scene of Cutie Altair being helpless in the face of the Space Chaos's magic was followed by the famous scene where she swore they'd fight again. The heroine had to survive. No matter how much like the protagonist someone seemed, if she died in the middle of the story, that meant she was nothing more than a side character.

"What do I have to do to be able to chase down Snow White?" said Dark Cutie.

"What do you have to do…? Hmm… Well, if you attack every single one of the civilians around here, you might get her, too."

"That's not something a villain should do. That's just pure evil."

"Micchan really was something. I'm impressed she had someone like you acting as a proper leader."

Dark Cutie turned around and narrowed her eyes. The setting sun was about to disappear behind the mountain summit.

Snow White, were you waiting for this time of day…?

It struck Dark Cutie that maybe this was an invitation. She jumped down from the high-rise to search for Snow White.

Upon landing soundlessly, a mosquito passed by her eyes, making a grating noise. She raised a hand to smack it, rethought that, and lowered her hand. She saw herself in this mosquito that had survived so late into the year and, somehow, was unable to squish it.

A villain was a villain because there existed a hero of justice. What should a villain do when she continued to live on, without ever being defeated by the righteous hero?

A mosquito out of season would eventually die. The life span of a villain was longer than that of a mosquito. Would she forever live as a disgrace in a world with no just hero, or would the hero of justice one day come?

Dark Cutie put her hands together and raised them up to the streetlight to create a shadow bat. The shadow bat flapped its wings on the wall's surface, snapped up the mosquito that had passed by,

chewed, and swallowed.

Mosquitoes died easily. Villains were more tenacious.

Micchan the Dictionary had died. Since she'd been a companion of Dark Cutie's, it should be fine to think of her as a villain. Most of all, she had been tenacious. Both villains and heroes were tenacious. Micchan the Dictionary couldn't have been a heroine. Her outfit had been mostly white, and perhaps that one thing about her had been hero-worthy, but in every other way, Micchan had gone against hero doctrine.

Dark Cutie separated her hands. The body of the bat split in two, broke into pieces, and was swallowed by the darkness.

She clicked on her magical phone to connect to the magical-girl directory. Dark Cutie was affiliated with the Magical Girl Resources Department, albeit unofficially, meaning she had the authority to peruse materials regular magical girls could not touch.

Snow White was a survivor of the final exam that had been held by the infamous Cranberry, Musician of the Forest.

She'd been disciple of Pythie Frederica, who currently had a bounty on her head.

All on her own, she'd arrested the Lake of Fire Flame Flamey, a student of the Archfiend Cram School.

She'd defeated Keek, a magical girl whom even the Magical Kingdom had been helpless to stop, and freed the girls who had been trapped inside her game.

She'd contributed to the arrest of Grim Heart, the incarnation of Chêne Osk Baal Mel, one of the Three Sages, the highest authority in the Magical Kingdom—beings said to surpass all magical girls.

The name of the weapon she possessed was Ruler, supposedly named after the one magical girl who had ever gotten the best of Snow White.

A smile came to Dark Cutie's face.

If Micchan or Glassianne were to see her, they would have been astonished, disturbed. *"You can actually smile?"* they'd say, inching away from her.

This smile was born from her certainty: Snow White was unquestionably a heroine. She had been born in order to defeat Dark Cutie. The two of them had met by chance in this city for the sake of that fateful battle.

Just now must have been their "encounter" arc. Their final

battle would be the next time or the time after that.

"Withdrawal order acknowledged," Dark Cutie said into her headset.

"Oh, okay then. I was ready to leave you behind there, Leader. Seriously."

◇ Premium Sachiko

It wasn't that Sachiko had never used her magic once. She wished she could make it so that she'd never used it before. She also wished she could at least forget about it. But when she wondered if maybe forgetting would be a sin, she also thought that might in fact be true, and so then even the desire to forget it came to seem sinful.

She'd have nightmares and be unable to sleep, cry out, and leap out of bed, which made Uluru get mad at her. But no matter how Sachiko suffered, it wouldn't undo the things she'd done. Whether or not you were forgiven depended on what it was you'd done, no matter how much you deeply regretted it.

And what Sachiko had done was not something she could be forgiven for.

She'd done it out of curiosity.

The three of them had become magical girls at nearly the same time; they'd all still been little and had played with their magic. Uluru would tell ridiculous lies to startle everyone, and they'd all get mad at her, while Sorami would guess at what was inside boxes without opening them, startling Sachiko very much.

Sachiko had not been allowed to use her magic. Compared with Uluru's and Sorami's magic, the outcome of hers was hard to predict. Just how great a thing was it to use up a lifetime's worth of luck? Even setting aside Sachiko's young age, she hadn't really been able to imagine what would happen.

But Sachiko had thought it was boring that she was the only one who had to sit on her hands and just watch when Uluru and Sorami looked like they were having fun with their magic. The "contracts" that Sachiko produced were all Chinese characters she couldn't read, and she didn't know what they said, but she had been told that if you were to circle all of them and "complete the contract," her magic powers would work.

At the time, it hadn't only been Sachiko, Sorami, and Uluru at

Puk Puck's estate. There had also been girls of the same age, all magical girls. They all spent their lives getting praise from Puk Puck when they used their magic in ways to make her proud, and at other times Puk Puck scolded them when they used it in the wrong way.

Sachiko had always been shy. She needed a lot more time than most in order to befriend someone. So she'd taken time to become friends with those other girls. She could only make friends through one process: First, they became friends with Sorami; then they also became friends with Uluru; and then when Sachiko was playing with Uluru and Sorami, the other girl would come hang out with them. Over the course of many playdates, they would make friends with Sachiko.

Of the friends she had made like that, there had been two particularly nice girls.

The both of them had sympathized with Sachiko.

"You're the only one who's not allowed to use your magic, huh?"

"That sucks."

"You couldn't use it secretly, could you?"

"But then I'll get scolded if I did, probably…," Sachiko had said.

"So then it's fine as long as you don't get found out, right?"

"Yeah, you just have to not get found out. If you don't tell the grown-ups you used it, nobody'll find out."

"But…"

"It's okay. Let's try using it once."

"Magic is real fun. I feel bad that you're the only one who can't use yours, Sachiko."

"Yeah. If you do get found out and you get scolded, we'll come together with you to say sorry to Lady Puk Puck," said the two friends, encouraging her. Sachiko, who had been even more of a coward then than now, was moved by their passionate support and came to think, *It's fine, as long as the grown-ups don't find out, and even if they do, if they come say sorry with me, it'd be okay*, and she had tried using her magic.

Some adults had defended her, saying she hadn't thought through it properly because she was a child. But most people started looking at her coldly. Sachiko figured that Uluru, Sorami, and the other children had sort of picked up on what had happened. They just hadn't brought it up either out of kindness or out of fear.

When you used up all of someone's luck, a terrible death would come to them. One friend, after being so glad to win the big prize at the candy store, without any warning on her way back home, had been hit right in the head by a meteorite falling from the sky.

The second one had gotten into an accident when she had gone to look for a book at the library. She'd been so glad the book that had always been on loan, no matter how long she waited, was there, and then once she had finished reading that book, a driver who'd fallen asleep at the wheel drove his truck through the fence and crashed through the wall.

Both deaths had been like something out of a gag manga or slapstick comedy. Someone who knew nothing of the situation might laugh if they heard these stories. Maybe they'd put them in the newspaper's funny pages, and there would be a bit of a stir about it.

But to the people involved, it wasn't in the least bit humorous.

Sachiko's friends had died because of her magic. The fact that she hadn't known they would die was no excuse. No matter how Puk Puck consoled her, no matter how she said it wasn't her fault, Sachiko was the one who had killed them.

Sachiko decided in her heart that she would never, ever use her magic. If she used her magic, someone would die. If the lucky four-leaf clover magical girl brought misfortune instead, then it would be better never to use her magic in the first place.

"I don't want to do the ceremony…," said Sachiko.

"But seriously, why don't you?" Uluru asked her.

"Because I just don't wanna!"

The two of them had had similar exchanges many times over while heading to the place where they'd arranged to meet Snow White. Uluru raged and yelled, and occasionally tried to coax her or bribe her with things, but Sachiko still would not acquiesce.

"Believe in Lady Puk Puck. Uluru's not telling you to believe in her. You're going to use your magic on the device. It doesn't matter whether the device lives or dies, 'cause it can't die or anything in the first place. It's not a living thing."

That was what Uluru said. So had the others.

But Sachiko couldn't stop imagining it. Whenever she thought about the ceremony, no matter what, nothing but bad things came to mind. Was that because she had killed her friends with her magic or because there really was something up with the ceremony that

made her want to run away?

"Listen. You understand that we're in trouble right now, yes? Maybe there's no helping that you're scared, but we only have Snow White on our side when there's so many enemies. That's the sort of situation we're in right now. This is way more dangerous than some ceremony."

"But—"

"Fine." Uluru nodded a bunch of times in resignation, putting her hands on Sachiko's shoulders. "Uluru will ask Lady Puk Puck: '*The ceremony really is safe, right? Nobody's going to die, right?*' But just understand that it'll be rude, okay? And if we find out it really isn't safe, then Uluru'll be on your side, Sachiko. Then that'll be fine, right? Right now, we have to get back home or we'll be in danger. Snow White and Uluru could die, okay? You don't want that to happen, right?"

"Well…no."

"So then let's go home together." Uluru patted Sachiko's shoulders. "It'll be okay. 'Cause Uluru promised to Lady Puk Puck to protect you. You'd feel bad if someone were to be unfortunate because of you, right? Then Uluru won't let that happen. You can tell this isn't a lie, right? 'Cause if it were, you'd really feel like you want to trust Uluru."

"Yeah…"

"So then let's go home now. We'll think about what happens next once we're home," Uluru said with particular cheer.

Sachiko looked down at her feet. There were marks on the floor of the warehouse of something having been dragged from the entrance to the edge, and at the end of the trail were dense cracks.

◇ Uluru

Uluru sent an e-mail to Puk Puck.

The enemy had discovered their hiding spot. According to Snow White, there were lots of enemies and the area around the estate was probably being watched, so it was best to be careful when going in or out. Uluru and Sachiko were still safe; they had temporarily split with Snow White, but she was also safe—Uluru had thrown all this information into a message and sent it.

The reply came quickly. It expressed concern for Uluru and

Sachiko's safety.

The message was casually worded, but imagining Puk Puck's face, Uluru's heart ached. Puk Puck would be worried about them. Puk Puck was kinder and more considerate than anyone. Having served Puk Puck for many years, Uluru had experienced Puk Puck's consideration many times.

She wanted to get out of this situation as quickly as possible and put Puk Puck at ease.

She would make every effort to that end.

With things like the enemy attack and Sorami's death coming one after another, Uluru had been thrown for a loop, shaken to her core. Puk Puck's message was effective in suppressing that impulse. Uluru would have liked to hear Puk Puck's voice if possible, but you couldn't ask for too much. Frankly, Uluru had been hoping for backup to finally come, but beggars can't be choosers, after all.

Leading Sachiko, avoiding big roads and places with a lot of pedestrian traffic, they chose to go through empty alleys as much as possible. Then they only traveled narrow roads, occasionally running over railway lines or coming up with schemes like clinging to the bottoms of large trucks until they arrived at the industrial district on the outside of town.

This area was filled with warehouses. There were endless lines of square, undecorated and angular concrete buildings; the only way to tell them apart was by the numbers written on them. It was close enough to the sea that the air had a subtle salty odor to it, but the places where boats unloaded their cargo were crowded with people.

Uluru zigzagged between the warehouses, pressed herself against warehouse D82, farthest from the ocean, and knocked.

They hadn't discussed either the position of the warehouse or the knock signal. But with Snow White, Uluru didn't have to communicate by speaking out loud. Snow White could read her mind as she ran and understand that it was Uluru there, even if she just knocked without having decided on a signal.

The door opened heavily, and the instant a person-sized space opened up, Uluru slid herself in and beckoned to Sachiko, who was waiting behind her, then quickly closed the door and locked it again. Inside, the warehouse was pitch-black without a single prick of light, but that was no problem when they were all magical girls.

"How are things on your end?" Uluru asked Snow White.

“I lost her,” she replied. “But she might track us by smell again, so I think we should switch locations periodically.”

“I sent a message to Lady Puk Puck. She sends her encouragement.”

“I see…”

“Yeah…”

Just by looking, Uluru could tell Snow White was disappointed to know backup wasn’t coming after all. Right now, however, Uluru couldn’t bring herself to accuse her of rudeness.

Sachiko slumped on the floor, seemingly exhausted. That was understandable.

Uluru looked at Snow White, which made Uluru think, *This makes it seem like I want help*, but she couldn’t take back having looked.

Suddenly, Snow White froze. Neither her face nor body so much as twitched.

It was as if she was focused and deep in thought, and for some reason or another, Uluru straightened herself in her seat.

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

She pondered and pondered, but in the end, she gave up.

Until now, Hamuel had overcome things by milking all the wisdom of the many tight spots she’d ever been in. Some things she could pull off, others not. This was something she could not do.

If only I had some Shufflins left, she thought. But someone she might call the Shufflin Hunter from Hell had just about wiped out all Shufflins in W City, and the most Hamuel could do was order them to flee. She was now stuck hiding atop some roof after the enemy had swarmed her in midair where she’d been looking out over the battlefield from the sky and giving instructions.

Her forces hadn’t been entirely wiped out. But it would be impossible to turn the tables now.

Hamuel had given up, but only on the capture of Premium Sachiko. She wasn’t going to give up on everything and shamelessly return to offer up her own head. If she couldn’t pluck any results now, then she’d plant some seeds that could be harvested down the line. She didn’t know when she’d be able to harvest, they might not even sprout before then, and even if they did, they could well

wither before their flowers bloomed. But even if they did wilt, it was better to sow seeds than to not.

Hamuel wiggled a few times to slip out from the crack between a machine and the wall. The dust wafted off her as she patted off her chest, shoulders, bottom, and back, and she leaned out from the roof to look below.

The sun had set. Vehicle headlights came and went. She circled around the circumference of the roof, looking not just down but also up, but it wasn't like there was anything special around.

It seemed the report from the surviving Shufflins was correct; the winged demons had disappeared from W City. With a lamenting sigh, wishing they could've disappeared before her forces had been so reduced, Hamuel pulled herself together and picked up the mic of her wireless radio.

She mentally prepared what she would say. Seating herself on the edge of the roof, she turned up the volume of the radio.

Her target was Snow White.

"Can you hear me…? Can you hear me…?" She should be able to hear. That was how Hamuel's magic worked. It was impossible to block out her voice or avoid hearing it.

"I'm currently speaking directly into your mind."

It was too bad Hamuel couldn't see her reaction. Even if talking to her was the same either way, she would have wanted to see her expression with a telescope while doing it.

"I'm the one who's been commanding the Shufflins… Oh, I'll let you know just in case—I'm not the Joker." She tried to sound as sincere and rational as she could. "As you can tell, my magic can transmit my voice to others one-way. Unfortunately, I can't hear anything you say, so don't take it personally. Plugging your ears won't do anything, either. My sincerest apologies; this won't harm you, but I do ask that you put up with it for a moment."

Thinking about how she was addressing the Magical-Girl Hunter made her a little nervous. This was completely different from giving orders to the Shufflins.

"As someone who has been in combat with you, I express respect for the way you all have fought. Though it is with great disappointment, I will give up and withdraw this time around—since total annihilation would be inevitable if I continued. This is without question a disgrace—however, I figure so that I might be able to excuse myself to my superiors, at least, I would say a few

words to you before returning. Being that I have no personal hostility toward you."

She would not lie. A poor lie would wind up shooting her in the foot. Hamuel's style was to reveal the full truth. But it was necessary to be careful when selecting whom to entrust that truth to.

"In fact, I would even like to become friends with you. Not long ago, you defeated Grim Heart, the incarnation of our leader Osk. That battle provided us with valuable data."

Hamuel thought of Grim Heart while she had still been alive. She would never have wanted Grim Heart as an ally or as an enemy. By the time she'd heard Grim Heart had been outwitted, not only Hamuel but the whole faction had been turned on its head in shock. Those on the inside had probably been more shocked than the other factions.

"The concept in the development of Grim Heart was the 'automatic rejection of communication.' This magic was conceived as a countermeasure against a certain magical girl. That magical girl is your current leader, Puk Puck."

Snow White was currently acting in support of the Puk Faction. There was no record of such behavior in the past, which led Hamuel to believe this was either provisional employment or Snow White had only recently joined. So there was a chance she'd still be in time.

"I'll explain things in their proper order: It's highly unusual for the Three Sages to meet face-to-face. I don't even know if they have faces at all, but well, that doesn't matter. Anyhow, when they engage in any sort of negotiation, they'll use an incarnation. Since some time ago, the Puk Faction has been using the one crowned as their leader, Puk Puck. And ever since, the Puk Faction has achieved greater benefits in negotiations, and they've been put at a disadvantage less often."

Hamuel continued to talk to Snow White one-sidedly. She felt like her throat was getting dry, but of course, that was her imagination.

"The Osk Faction has tried all possible means and all possible magical girls when engaging in negotiation, but against Puk Puck, it never goes well, no matter what. Furthermore, any magical girls involved in negotiations with Puk Puck have a surprisingly good impression of her." Just once, when acting as attendant for a

meeting, Hamuel had spotted Puk Puck from a distance. She clearly remembered Puk Puck coming off extremely well even from that brief glance.

"After thousands—tens of thousands of negotiations since, the Osk Faction compiled some statistics. We've tried mixing various experimental techniques and alternating between magical-girl incarnations, and ultimately, we came to the following conclusion: Puk Puck's magic is to distort the impression she gives others."

What sort of look was on Snow White's face now? Hamuel started to picture it but then shook her head to concentrate again.

"Any remarks or rude behavior that might give a bad impression are distorted, and other people feel as if they're held in esteem. They think highly of Puk Puck. Even enemies once they meet and talk with her become her friend."

Hamuel paused for a moment. Was Snow White listening properly? Hamuel could never quite get used to making speeches when she couldn't see how the audience reacted.

"There has been a rule ever since forbidding Puk Puck's involvement in any discussion among the Three Sages or their incarnations since anything would easily be approved for her, two-against-one. On this matter, the Puk Faction hasn't really complained—more like, they've made excuses. And since they haven't voiced any real opposition, they must be aware that what they're doing is just barely crossing the line."

The Shufflins were sending her the signal that they were ready to withdraw now. Hamuel gave them the okay with a wink and decided to continue her broadcasting for a little while longer.

"I don't think we're mistaken about Puk Puck's magic. No matter how she might try to disguise it with words, even if you read the intentions behind those words with your magic, all that will reach you is good feelings."

Hamuel stood. It was about time to finish. "So please be careful. Any feelings like sympathy, trust, and attachment might well originate from Puk Puck's magic. Though it may be no use in saying it now."

That was it for warnings. In order to gain Snow White's favor, Hamuel would offer even further beneficial information. "Yes, yes, as proof that I have no ill will, I'll tell you something nice: It seems the other force aside from us has withdrawn. Though I don't know if they had a time limit or if there was some other reason for their

retreat. Well, they may have just pretended to withdraw while they're actually keeping an eye on things, so please take care to make your own judgment on that point." Hamuel figured it was 99 percent likely the withdrawal of the third force was not a feint. But she would urge further caution. "It seems that group is quite good at reconnaissance, and they've eliminated the Shufflins in town in a targeted manner. Based on the trends from such activity, it seems as if major roads, busy areas, facilities where people gather, etc., are under closest watch. Since the Shufflins deployed at such positions were all attacked, I believe it would be best to avoid such locations."

She didn't know how Snow White was reacting. But it wasn't as if Hamuel didn't sense that she'd made an impact. Of course, this could well be nothing more than her own fantasy.

"Well then, pardon me for rattling on and on. I can't have you losing sleep over such a long-winded sermon and then getting mad at me! So I'll leave it there. I very much hope we will be allies the next time we meet. The Osk Faction will welcome you. I did hate Grim Heart myself, you know."

She cut off communication.

She figured she'd basically told the truth. Hamuel wasn't fond of lies. It was unlikely for a lie to please someone. It was easy to please someone with the truth.

Though Snow White was associated with the Puk Faction, this was recent, and she wouldn't have been under the influence of Puk Puck's power for very long. Even if this never turned into more than a little seed of doubt, that was surely more meaningful than nothing.

Even to Hamuel watching on, it had felt odd that Puk Puck hadn't sent any backup at all. Between that and the withdrawal of the mysterious third party, there was something happening that was out of Hamuel's field of knowledge. A future where she was indeed cooperating with Snow White might actually be close at hand.

◇ **Snow White**

She couldn't hear the voice anymore.

Just what were that person's intentions? Of course, Snow White couldn't take what had been said at face value. Still, it wasn't like

she couldn't believe any of it. Anyone could feel doubtful, based on the logic of that voice, and Snow White wouldn't even be able to trust her own magic anymore.

She had assumed Uluru, Sachiko, and Sorami's attachment to Puk Puck was rooted in her personality. But if, as the voice said, this was the magic of an incarnation of one of the Three Sages, she could easily pull something like deceiving people over the course of decades.

If the question was, was there anything suspicious about Puk Puck, the answer was yes. Why was it she had so stubbornly not sent them backup? If she was a Sage incarnation, she'd have lots of subordinates. Inside the estate alone, Snow White had heard the hearts' voices of many magical girls. If she had truly wanted to retrieve Sachiko, she could have just deployed those as backup.

Did she not actually want Sachiko back?

That didn't make sense, either. Uluru and Sorami had never been lying. Puk Puck had gone so far as to use Snow White, an outsider, to look for Sachiko—so then how could she not want to get Sachiko back?

Was it possible to falsify everything, including Snow White's own thoughts, the worries that troubled Puk Puck most deeply, her unconscious thoughts about things she didn't want to happen? Snow White got the feeling that an incarnation of one of the Three Sages could manage that. The other Sage incarnation Snow White had encountered, Grim Heart, had prevented Snow White from hearing her thoughts at all until she lifted her magic.

Snow White clenched her hand around her armband.

Sachiko did not want to do the ceremony. Her dislike of it was abnormal. She said that if she were to join the ceremony, someone was sure to meet misfortune. Puk Puck hadn't been thinking anything of the sort. She hadn't wanted to sacrifice anyone through the ceremony. Knowing Puk Puck's personality, Sachiko should have known that, but she still didn't want to do it. Was it solely because she was a coward? Or had she sensed something?

Snow White looked at Sachiko. Recently, the girl had gone entirely silent, not saying anything at all. When Snow White had discovered her in the amusement park, she'd been huddled up as small as possible, squatting in the darkness. Even though she was no longer doing that, she somehow looked smaller than before. Her curly bangs hung in despondence.

“…Snow White? What’s wrong, pon?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Nothing…? Are you really okay? You looked like you were kind of zoning out.”

“I’m all right.”

There was no time. She didn’t have the freedom to be taking these groundless rumors from the Osk Faction seriously. If they just sat around, Dark Cutie would come after them. Snow White always had lots of things she needed to do, even right now.

◇ Bluebell Candy

Bluebell Candy had heard that a magical girl in a wheelchair named Pfle was the head of the Magical Girl Resources Department. When someone rose through the ranks quickly, there were plenty of opportunities for people to talk about them—even out of pure envy. Pfle was important enough that even Bluebell, who had no friends to gossip with, would know about her. It was fair to assume Pfle was pretty famous.

Pfle examined Bluebell’s face closely, and Bluebell hid behind a cedar tree, showing only half her face. Maybe it was rude, but her fear took precedence. “U-um… C-can I help you…?”

“You’re bad at lying… Actually, I doubt you’re even capable of lying in the first place.”

Bluebell didn’t get how Pfle could say such things when they’d only just met. “Well, that’s true… Um, I think I am a bad liar, but…”

“That’s a good thing. Liars get up to nothing good. The Research and Development Department made a good choice in hiring you.”

“Huh? Do you know about me?”

“Of course. I’m with Magical Girl Resources.”

“Oh… That’s right.”

Pfle rotated her wheelchair on its right wheel. She was looking up at the sky. “We’re out in the wilderness, but with the city so close, I can’t say the stars are shining beautifully.”

“Right…”

Just talking to Pfle left Bluebell mentally drained. She wasn’t good at talking with important people. In elementary school, when

she'd been put in charge of the principal's office on cleaning duty, she'd been given more opportunities to speak with the principal whether she liked it or not, and that had been so exhausting. Even setting aside Pfle being an important person, Bluebell felt the girl herself was exhausting.

Things might have been different if Deluge was there, but she had left. When Pfle had shown up suddenly, the two of them had had some kind of conversation, and then Deluge had flown off somewhere, taking the Demon Wings with her. When Bluebell tried to follow, Deluge had kicked her down and politely ordered, "Don't go anywhere. Please wait there." Now Bluebell was left waiting together with Pfle.

Being told not to follow had made her very sad, but she was also a bit happy to hear Deluge say not to go anywhere. It made her think that maybe Deluge did need her. That said, it was also possible Deluge didn't want Bluebell going off somewhere spouting half-truths.

There was no one around at night in the middle of nowhere—no road for cars to travel, not even any hiking paths or animal trails. The two of them were the only ones there.

"Did you get to know Deluge from the R&D Department?" Pfle asked her suddenly.

Bluebell nearly had a heart attack; she desperately tried to calm herself as she answered, "Yes, um, I did."

"Why are you with her?"

"Because I couldn't just leave her alone."

"Indeed, she's someone you couldn't simply leave to their own devices. But wouldn't having an outsider with her cause lots of problems when there are so many things she doesn't want known?"

Bluebell shuddered at the thought of what it meant to "silence someone." Pfle's position as the head of the Magical Girl Resources Department gave a sense of reality to the fictional-seeming phrase that only ever appeared in period dramas or detective shows. Even if this was a rare thing, Bluebell was not happy about that at all.

"U-um! I'm—I'm not exactly p-planning to tell anyone!"

"Sure you aren't. You don't lie anyway."

Bluebell breathed a sigh of relief.

That relief made her thoughts turn to the other person she had to worry about. "Um…"

"Yes?"

“Where did Deluge go? She’ll come back, right?”

“Regardless of her original intentions, she’ll likely return. Princess Deluge is on high alert right now. I’m sure there are several foes she would try to take on precisely because they are dangerous, but I doubt they’re in the direction she’s going. If she were a little more thickheaded, I would have liked to plant a transmitter on her to find out where she’s going, but careless use of such cheap tricks would surely expose me. And that would inevitably damage trust, which is not what I want.”

“Dangerous? Did Deluge go somewhere dangerous?”

“I expressly spoke at length for you, but you only jump on the parts you want to know.”

“Oh, um, sorry.”

Pfle looked up at the sky once more. Bluebell had the random thought that her jawline was so pretty.

“It’s coming,” said Pfle.

“Coming?”

Hearing the sound of a bird, Bluebell was startled and inched closer to Pfle. Was it an owl or another type of bird? Having been born and raised in the city, Bluebell didn’t know anything about distinguishing bird calls.

“I’m not talking about a bird.”

“You’re not?”

There was a rustling in the thicket. Bluebell let out a little shriek and clung to Pfle.

“It’s a shame about Micchan,” said Pfle.

“…Yes,” agreed one of the newcomers.

“Right?” said the other newcomer. “I figured she was the one person who’d never croak. Even the gods couldn’t have expected me and the leader to be the ones to survive. Oh, but I guess it’s less gods and more so reapers in this case, huh?”

The magical girl who seemed to be melting into the shadow was Dark Cutie, while the bespectacled one with glasses was Glassianne, who appeared somehow relieved. Dark Cutie was in a sourer mood. She’d been a lady of few words since the moment they’d met, but now Bluebell got the feeling she was less taciturn and more sullen.

The magical girl in the scholar’s cap who’d been with them, Micchan the Dictionary, was gone. Bluebell could surmise what had happened to her from Pfle’s remark, “It’s a shame about Micchan.”

If the fight had been that intense, that had to be what she meant. Bluebell felt a chill that was out of season and out of place. One wrong step and maybe Deluge would've wound up like that. Or maybe it wasn't that one wrong step would have ended it, but that she had been lucky to survive at all.

"Looks like Miss Deluge isn't here," said Glassianne. "Where'd she go?"

"She's gone to check on the safety of an important individual."

"Important individual? You're really trying to hint at something, huh? Can I assume that's someone more important than Premium Sachiko?"

Pfle smiled.

Dark Cutie furrowed her brow, and Glassianne's expression turned from a grin to something more serious. Bluebell wrapped her arms around her body to try and stop herself from trembling. Her body and arms were so cold. Pfle's smile was filled with irritation and anger, but it was nonetheless a smile.

"It's probably too late now," said Pfle. "We've fallen behind… Or have we been forestalled? If we're going to recover at this point in time, we'll need both wholehearted efforts and dazzling wits. Oh, Glassianne— You need not consider pursuing Deluge with your glasses. We need even stronger cooperation."

◇ Snow White

By the time they emerged from the warehouse, the sun had fully set —prime time for magical girls who hid under cover of darkness.

But this time of day wouldn't make Dark Cutie happy. If she was going to use her hound to hunt for them, she'd have to prepare her own light. With a light like the one that had been made for her in the amusement park illuminating her to walk the streets at night, she would stand out hopelessly.

The plan was as follows:

Snow White alone would detransform and head to Puk Puck's estate on foot and via public transportation with Sachiko and Uluru in her bag the whole time. "Uluru trusts you," Uluru said as she leaped into the bag, adding, "No more of your nonsense," to Sachiko, who'd been reluctant as she got dragged in as well.

The enemy knew what Snow White looked like, but they didn't

know what Koyuki Himekawa looked like. She could walk boldly all around the city like this and no one would question her. Fal would be inside Koyuki's pocket, checking for magical girls in the area, and when the time came, he could make her transform instantly. Fal was synced up with Snow White's transformation mechanism. With human reflexes, by the time she sensed a magical-girl attack, it would already be too late. That was why it was said that no magical girl would turn back to human form on the battlefield. But for that, Fal could respond in a matter of seconds.

Koyuki Himekawa would get as close to the estate as she could get, and depending on how things went, she'd transform there and buy some time. Uluru would come out of the bag as well and they'd fight together, and when the enemy faltered, they'd let Sachiko out and have her dash into the house on her own. If someone who had been assumed until a moment ago to be just some high school girl were to suddenly transform into a magical girl, their opponents would be unprepared. They would take advantage of that.

Getting trailed by Dark Cutie's shadow hounds was a cause for concern, but now that it was nighttime, she couldn't track Snow White and Fal so easily. She hadn't caught up to them when they had been in the warehouse, so that meant by using public transportation, they'd be able to get even farther away from her.

Transferring from train to bus, Koyuki headed for the city center. Even at this time of day, there were more people out and about than there were in N City, Koyuki's hometown. That just made it all the easier for magical girls to hide in the crowds. Fal widened his enemy search radius to its utmost limit, keeping a cautious watch, but there had been nothing so far.

The crowds of people meant there were more trains in operation equipped with a greater number of cars. They wouldn't be waiting for up to an hour for the train to come. They moved smoothly along, and up until this point, they passed by not even one magical girl.

"You haven't detected any magical girls?" Snow White asked Fal.

"There's only you, pon."

"Really?"

"What would I lie for, pon?"

"Not a single card soldier or black shadow has approached so far?"

“Maybe they’re focusing their forces in the area around the estate, pon?”

“I don’t like this.”

“Snow White. If you think this won’t work, just pretend to be an innocent bystander and walk right past, pon. You can’t risk your life trying to do this, pon. It isn’t worth it to go that far, pon.”

There had been so many enemies, but now there were none. Though they were approaching the estate, they still had yet to pass any. The “voice” had told Snow White that the enemy forces had withdrawn. Was that true? Uluru and Sachiko had also happily told her they hadn’t seen a single enemy up until they’d met with Snow White.

Snow White maintained a completely natural pace as she walked along the sidewalk. They were nearing the estate. No new magical girls had been detected. She could see the tiled roof of Puk Puck’s estate.

“…There’s nothing, pon.”

“No one surrounding the estate?”

“I mean, there’s no pings.”

Whether it was Shufflins or demons, if they were to approach, Fal would detect them. And magical girls, of course, would ping his radar, too. Their expectation that there would be a watch near the estate making it impossible to come in or out had come to nothing, but Snow White couldn’t be glad about it. She couldn’t help but feel there had to be something up.

“You can’t let your guard down, pon. Don’t run yet, just walk, pon.”

“Roger.”

No new magical girls detected. She approached the mansion feeling impatient, but she couldn’t rush. She went with caution. She’d asked Fal to send a message to the estate from her magical phone—a simple one saying she was bringing Sachiko and would be there soon. No backup had come, but they could at least open the gates and send someone to receive them.

“New detections: none. Detections: none. Detections—yes! A magical girl has entered range and is coming straight over to make contact, pon!”

Fal made Snow White transform, saying, “One magical girl detected besides you, Snow White!”

Snow White ran. Uluru leaped out of the bag and chased after

her.

The white walls of the estate were already right in front of them. They were close enough that a small stretch of her arm and she'd nearly reach. If no one else got in their way now, just one step, and they'd be able to return Premium Sachiko.

But then, Snow White's pace slackened. Uluru, running behind her, nearly fell over. Her feet got tangled up and she protested, "Hey, what're you doing?!"

With no heed to Uluru's wailing, Snow White slowed from a run to a walk before eventually coming to a full stop.

Thirty feet away stood a magical girl—one she knew well. High-toothed geta, a shuriken-shaped hair clip, a ninja-themed costume, one eye and one arm, her sleeve swaying in the wind. Snow White had thought she'd gone missing after getting involved in that incident. No matter how Snow White had searched, she'd never been able to find her. Lit under the light of the streetlamp, the right side of her upper body was colored a pale yellow.

"…Ripple."

"It's been a long time, Snow White."

That ever-so-familiar face was smiling.

Snow White took a step forward. Her hands were shaking.

"Snow White? Is that really Ripple, pon?"

"It's Ripple… It's Ripple; it's her. Those thoughts…" *They're hers.* Snow White could hear them. That was Ripple's mind. Snow White dashed forward and clung to Ripple, who embraced her tight and gently stroked her back. This ninja girl's hands felt like Ripple's, too.

“Ripple! Why—?! How?! Where have you been all this time?!”

“I’m sorry, Snow White. I just couldn’t…”

A little confused, Uluru ran up to them and called out, “What’s this? Someone you know?”

“It’s a friend of hers who went missing, pon,” Fal answered.

The hand stroking Snow White froze.

Snow White was unable to stop her. Arms still around Snow White, Ripple reached into the bag that hung from Snow White’s waist, thrusting her hand in. When Ripple pulled her hand out, she had a pained-looking Premium Sachiko by the neck, and before Snow White could even be startled, there was a shower of blood.

Clutching her neck, Premium Sachiko fell to the ground. Uluru cried out. Snow White looked up at Ripple in a daze; Ripple stared at her bloodstained right hand, her expression twisted with utter shock.

Snow White could hear Ripple’s mind at work—Ripple was confused. Ripple’s heart, her mind—

“Why…? Why did you…?” With a wail, Uluru raised her gun and struck Ripple.

Ripple let it hit her; the gun stock smacked her across the face and sent her tumbling to the ground. Uluru stepped forward to hit her again, but Snow White moved to stand between her and Ripple.

“Get out of my way!” Uluru screamed, swinging at Snow White. But before she could bring down her gun, Snow White blocked it and turned back to Ripple.

“Ripple!” she cried.

Ripple’s expression, twisted in shock, shifted to sadness, then to anger. She turned away.

“Ripple!”

Ripple didn’t answer. She ran off, only her thoughts pouring into Snow White: what Ripple had done, what Ripple had been made to do. Ripple’s heart was crying out—it cried out that she could no longer be with Snow White.

“Sachiko! Sachiko!”

Uluru’s screams brought Snow White back to reality. Premium Sachiko’s transformation had been undone, and she was in human form, facedown in a sea of blood.

“Medical attention! She needs medical attention, pon! We might

still make it, pon!" Fal cried.

Snow White and Uluru looked at each other, then picked Sachiko up and ran into the estate.

The heat was seeping away from Sachiko's body. Her heartbeat and breathing both stopped.

Why had Ripple been waiting in front of the estate? Why had there been no other magical girls besides her? Why had she done something like this? Why had she looked at Snow White after she'd done it with such disbelief, such incredulity?

No matter how much she mulled it over, none of it added up. The gates of the estate opened heavily, and the two magical girls leaped inside as if they were racing to get in.

INTERLUDE

The armor was familiar with the kind of features a player wouldn't really notice if they were playing casually, like the bonus zones and warp points—not the sorts of things even a monkey could learn if it tried. It seemed safe to assume the armor had a human-level intellect; it only had difficulty communicating.

Shadow Gale pretended to purely enjoy the game. Occasionally, she'd get absorbed in playing and forget about her current predicament, but she was mostly pretending.

Since the armor girl had human-level intellect, it would be impossible to modify the TV or the game console while they played without the armor noticing. Shadow Gale's magic could modify machines, but it couldn't do the impossible.

As long as the armor stayed, Shadow Gale wouldn't get her chance to escape. So then what should she do to get the armor to leave? No point in trying to get a game over since she'd probably just restart it.

On the screen, their two characters shot fireballs as they swam through the water stage.

What would happen if she rendered the game console unusable?

Shadow Gale eyed the console. Obviously, it was an old model. It was dirty, and the main power switch was missing. It looked like a little shove would break it. Shadow Gale had heard somewhere that with old game consoles, just the slightest shock would make them stop working.

What if, for example, Shadow Gale was to get so into the game that she flailed around with the controller? Then she would accidentally lose her balance, and when she set her hand down to avoid falling, it would land on the game console. Unable to bear the weight, the console would break. But that would be okay. Shadow Gale could modify machines, so fixing a broken game console was

something she could pull of quickly.

A careless “ohhh” slipped out of her lips. Looking to the side, wondering, *She didn’t find that weird, did she?* she saw the armor girl was looking at the TV screen, focused on the game.

Shadow Gale looked back at the game, too. Doing it like that, she could modify the console very naturally and with the armor girl sitting right next to her. At a glance, it would look as if they were playing the game normally, but if she actually modified it so that she could request help from the outside, she’d be saved.

Let’s go with that.

First, Shadow Gale had to reach a point where it wouldn’t be weird for her to get so absorbed in the game that she’d flail around with the controller. Attempting to calm her racing heart, she pretended to be having fun with the game like normal until they reached the final level of the boss stage.

Shadow Gale had gotten pretty used to this game. The reflexes of a magical girl were suited to simple action games, too. Beating enemies and avoiding traps, they arrived at the boss’s location. Scary background music played, and the boss sprite, three times bigger than all the others, appeared.

The boss battle began. The armor’s character evaded attacks beautifully, aiming with precision for the boss’s weak spot with fireballs and steadily dealing damage. The boss gradually faded in color to show that its remaining HP was decreasing.

Shadow Gale could have focused purely on dodging to avoid getting hit, but that would be no cause for overreaction. Pretending to be a player who was trying to show off their skills like, “*I’m not a burden, okay!*” she deliberately leaped into the danger zone, jumped, dodged an attack with a “Whoops,” and did a wide swing of her controller to the right. Then she swung it left, nearly striking the armor girl in the head with it, somehow managing to adjust the position of her movement.

Now!

Shadow Gale’s body rocked unsteadily. Or rather, she made herself rock.

She put her hand down in an attempt to support herself. Her right hand was going down toward the game console. Right before she was about to stick out her right hand, she caught sight of the armor girl, holding her controller.

No matter how Shadow Gale had held her back, the armor girl

had never mocked her, like Kanoe had. She'd pointed to the screen to show her the locations of hidden equipment. She'd let Shadow Gale take points on the bonus stages, perhaps to keep the point allocation from getting lopsided.

The memories of their brief playtime together rushed back to her, each place in the game she'd received kindness. Shadow Gale was about to trample over that kindness by deliberately destroying the game console. It was sure to make the armor girl sad. She probably wouldn't expect someone she'd been doing friendly co-op play with would try to pull something like that.

Shadow Gale was hesitating. Her hand stopped. She clenched her teeth.

The faces of all the people who would worry about her absence rose in her mind—her father, mother, friends, and while she was at it, Kanoe, too. She remembered Patricia, who had gone down protecting her.

This was not the time to be getting emotional over this. She had to tell Kanoe that she was safe, to get her to come save her.

Shadow Gale made up her mind.

Reaching toward the game console, she swung down on it with all the weight of her body, but right before her hand hit, the armor girl caught her hand.

The console was safe. The armor girl brought Shadow Gale back to her original sitting position, and Shadow Gale muttered things like, "That was close," and "Guess I got a little too worked up" as she scratched her head to hide her embarrassment. She'd forgotten that this armor girl had the reflexes of someone who could exchange blows with a combat-oriented magical girl.

The boss's color faded, and eventually, the victory fanfare rang out. Having hit zero HP, the boss's body exploded, and the words STAGE CLEAR came up on-screen—but it stopped there. The PAUSE button had been pressed. Not by Shadow Gale, but by the armor. When Shadow Gale gave the armor a sidelong glance, she found the armor looking not at the screen but behind them. This drew Shadow Gale's gaze over, too.

Hmm?

She'd thought it was her imagination. It was not. A sound that was gradually becoming clear could be heard as far as this room—footsteps. Someone was coming down the stairs toward them.

Setting down the controller, Shadow Gale turned around on her

knees. Had someone come? Was it the ice magical girl who'd captured her? Or was it someone else? Maybe this person had busted in to save Shadow Gale.

The footsteps came closer, loud enough now that anyone would be able to hear them. Then they stopped. Shadow Gale suppressed her anxiety as she steadily eyed the door.

There was a light *knock-knock*, and then without waiting for a reply, it creaked open.

EPILOGUE

◇ **Puk Puck**

Had Premium Sachiko returned?

Or had she been captured or killed?

Puk Puck wanted her to come back safely together with Uluru and Snow White. Puk Puck may have wound up abandoning them surrounded by enemies, but still, she sincerely wished for their safe return.

The ceremony was very, very important, and that was exactly why the Osk Faction was trying to interfere with it. Sachiko was essential to raise the odds of the ceremony's success. Without Sachiko, it would be far worse than one death. With Sachiko, they could keep the losses to just one.

It truly was a shame that the Osk Faction had found out about Sachiko. Puk Puck didn't know who had informed them, but once she found out who had, she would have to give them a scolding, maybe even go so far as to withhold their meals for two days.

She would have liked to send Sachiko help, if possible. She liked Sachiko, and she understood that her presence would make the success of the ceremony easier, but she couldn't watch Sachiko only. This ceremony was very important, and she had to prepare many different parts. Sachiko was ultimately just one of those parts. She was a very important part, but it wasn't like the ceremony couldn't be done without her.

The one Puk Puck was about to go pick up now was a *necessary part*. Sachiko was an important part, but without the necessary part, they wouldn't be able to carry out the ceremony in the first place. The Osk Faction was careless, so they wouldn't realize that difference. Necessary and important were completely different.

While all that kerfuffle was going on in W City, Puk Puck had been following the whereabouts of this necessary part using all her

resources save for Uluru, Sorami, and Snow White. She'd disappeared from the place where she should have always been, so Puk Puck had had to struggle to find her. After investing all her people, magic, and money, at last, she'd managed to find her.

Locating this girl was the job of Puk Puck's subordinates, while escorting her away was her own job. Both of these were necessary. As a result, there were no more personnel to go save Sachiko. Maybe it was her selfishness in saying she wanted both of them that had kept Puk Puck from finding her. An important person back in the day had once said that the first step of success was to focus on what you really needed, then go for the challenge. It wasn't good to get greedy.

Thanks to everyone investing their efforts in the right direction, Puk Puck would soon acquire this girl who was the key part in the ceremony. Now, they could finally hold that ceremony. Puk Puck was very excited, and everyone was glad.

Those who'd said the ceremony was too difficult and those who'd smugly said that they still didn't know everything about the device were all wrong. Those who said she was just trying to score points, and Osk, who didn't want anyone else to score points and was getting in her way, they were all wrong. Everyone had to understand that it was way past time for that.

But if they could just properly understand that the Magical Kingdom didn't exist anywhere anymore, then the only option they could choose was the activation of the device.

Had Sachiko made it back? The question weighed on Puk Puck. She was such a crybaby; once she'd returned, Puk Puck would have to soothe her. Uluru might be angry, but if Puk Puck were to praise her for her hard work, she was bound to cheer up. If Sorami were there, she'd have joined Puk Puck in reassuring the two of them, but Sorami was gone now.

They'd arrived at their goal, so Puk Puck got out of the car.

Restraining her sorrow, Puk Puck smiled brightly. This was the first in a long while that she was using her magic at full power. It didn't matter that these were new-model demons or artificial magical girls. Winged demons prostrated themselves before her while a magical girl with a sword and another with a canon went to their knees. All of them were looking at Puk Puck, who was supposed to be their enemy, with love and respect. They would make every accommodation for her sake.

After she had the guards open the front door for her, the demons guided her in, and Puk Puck went down the stairs. She was headed to meet the girl she'd been so eagerly awaiting. Puk Puck never dialed back her magic; this girl had to become her friend, too. A demon put its hand on the door and turned the knob. Puk Puck beamed past the door that slowly opened.

"I've come to pick you up, Shadow Gale."

◇ Pythie Frederica

Though Snow White had grown significantly as an individual, there was still some naïveté left in her.

But that naïveté wasn't a bad thing.

A single magical girl had an existence full of dreams and prayers and hopes along with any feelings other magical girls had entrusted to her. To weigh that against the danger that such a magical girl might cause, and agonize over which girl to select, was a beautiful act beyond Frederica's own capabilities. The sort of magical girl who agonized over how killing one person might save ten thousand lives but questioned whether you should kill that one person when nothing had happened, was incredibly close to the ideal magical girl.

Frederica wanted very much to respect the future the girls chose, but now was the critical moment where everything could go to waste, or hope would still remain. If killing would allow hope to remain in the future, then Frederica would do the dirty work.

Right palm facing upward, Frederica indicated the coffee cup. "Please, have some. It's a special blend."

"The Frederica special? There isn't any hair in it?"

"Goodness, hair? I wouldn't dream of doing something so wasteful. If I were going to mix anything in, I would rather it be poison."

"I see. True enough. Then I'll have it." So prompted, the magical girl reached out to the coffee cup and lightly touched the handle, whereupon there was a shrill, sharp noise. Looking over, Frederica saw the handle had broken off the cup.

"Pardon me," said Frederica. "I'll get you a new one."

"No, I'm quite fine with this." Taking up the cup with a gesture too graceful to be called "grabbing," she brought it to her lips.

Magical girls were also resistant to heat. Mere hot coffee was nothing to them. “This is delicious.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Such a lack of modesty is very like you.”

“I’m often told as such.”

“Might I have the recipe?”

“I’ll get it for you.”

In this environment of concrete flooring and water-stained ceiling, where air freshener battled with mold, the only fine things here were the furniture, utensils, and the coffee. There were two identical white rocking chairs of the same type as a famous American writer had once had, and a wooden table of the same brand was sandwiched between Frederica and a magical girl all in blue as they enjoyed coffee together. The blue of her costume was overly vivid and hurt to look at. It wasn’t quite to Frederica’s taste. Frederica preferred more modest, refined colors. Her own costume was neither. People want things precisely because they do not have them.

“But wouldn’t you say it’s symbolic for the cup to break?” asked the magical girl in blue.

“If it means anything, I’m sure it’s a bad sign,” replied Frederica.

“This has been nothing but miscalculations.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“We really ought to have noticed earlier.”

The both of them—though one of them with a cup that had lost its handle—sipped their drinks.

“Just eliminating Premium Sachiko was the most we could handle, after all,” said the magical girl in blue.

“It was.”

“Though we did accomplish our initial goal, as things have turned out, it’s difficult to say our plan was a success.”

“Indeed.”

“How ironic that Shadow Gale, whose capture was intended as a diversion, was in fact Puk Puck’s true goal.”

“A diversion?”

“Was it for something else?”

“No… If you say it was a diversion, then I’m sure that’s what it was. I know you’re not the sort of magical girl to tell petty lies, Lapis Lazuline.”

“Your praise is greatly exaggerated.”

The true goal of Frederica and the other individual present—the first-generation Lapis Lazuline—had been to kidnap Premium Sachiko in order to stop the Puk Faction’s planned ceremony. Ideally, they wanted her alive; however, if that wasn’t possible, then they were willing to kill her. To that end, they had prepared one unit to cause a ruckus in public—Deluge—and one unit moving from the shadows—Ripple. They’d involved Pfle since they figured best case they could drag her in while she was in the weakened position of having lost her memories.

Though they had accomplished their major initial goal, considering the facts that had come to light following that, they had to admit this plan had failed, after all.

Frederica tilted back her cup.

The magical girl seated before her—the first-generation Lapis Lazuline—wasn’t a partner she could fully trust in the first place. Their alliance was a temporary one since their interests happened to align for the moment. Frederica could keenly sense, however, that Lazuline was not revealing her true intentions.

Though that was true for the both of them.

Frederica held Lazuline in high regard but not in the area of things such as trust, confidence, sincerity, or honesty.

“Regardless, there’s no helping now how things wound up. I really must applaud the Sage’s incarnation. Sachiko must surely have been an important pawn, too.”

“Her elimination will reduce the ceremony’s rate of success.”

“Even if the odds of success are somewhat decreased, I’m sure she’ll force it anyway.”

Frederica thought she should have realized earlier just how suspicious it was that there had been no backup from the Puk Faction, even after Premium Sachiko had been discovered.

And then there was how they’d been distracted from what was really to happen during this ceremony.

The ceremony involved operating a device left behind by the First Mage. But they were not going to use a lifetime’s worth of luck generated by Premium Sachiko to operate the machine. This ceremony would use Shadow Gale, who had acquired a lifetime’s worth of luck generated by Premium Sachiko, in order to modify the machine. Therefore, the key player was not Sachiko— It was Shadow Gale. With Sachiko gone, it was simply that the odds of

success would fall, but without Shadow Gale, they wouldn't be able to carry out the ceremony in the first place.

Even if Frederica were to ask how far Lazuline had gone in considering Shadow Gale's value, Lazuline wouldn't tell her, and neither would she say if Frederica asked, either.

"So Puk Puck used Sachiko as bait to cleverly capture Shadow Gale," said Lazuline.

"Actually… I do wonder about that myself." Frederica spread her hands and offered a slight smile. "She put surprising trust in her subordinates, and in Snow White as well, didn't she? It wasn't that Sachiko was a decoy, but rather that Puk Puck thought only a few people would be enough to pull it off. In any case, she was fully occupied with Shadow Gale and couldn't spare any others."

Lazuline clapped her hands. "That's a new theory. I'll take it."

"I think possessing such a human softness gives a Sage incarnation a certain familiarity."

"I agree."

The both of them sipped their coffee.

"But still…was it okay to do that with Ripple?" asked Lazuline.

"It was for the best."

"Was it?"

"She was useful to me, and I was also able to teach her various things. I feel we built a good relationship, but things couldn't remain as they were. I couldn't hope for any further growth in her if she was purely under my control."

Frederica pulled a thin sword from her sleeve and held it up to the light that poured through the window. "Using this sword on someone else would undo Ripple's brainwashing, and then she would leave me. The time when I must use this sword is approaching. The only difference was simply parting with Ripple sooner, rather than later."

"Isn't there such a thing as timing?"

"Timing?"

"It's rather in poor taste to undo the magic the moment she killed Sachiko, of all times."

"Oh, that's just a bit of mischief on my part."

Snow White could hear the thoughts of people in trouble.

Frederica had Ripple attack Sachiko with Snow White present. Once Frederica started thinking about what would happen with Ripple and Snow White after the former came to her senses the next

moment, she couldn't stop herself.

It was a bad habit. A very bad habit. But Pythie Frederica was a magical girl who had been built by bad habits. It was too late for self-loathing now.

She got a thrill imagining how Snow White would feel once she heard Ripple's innermost thoughts, what Ripple would do once she came to her senses after having been under Frederica's control. Right now, Snow White was being polished by a whetstone. Depending on the manner of polishing, she could well break. Finishing off her work, Frederica made adjustments to avoid that.

It wasn't good to be self-centered like Dark Cutie. Snow White didn't exist for Frederica's sake—Frederica existed for hers.

"Don't come crying to me if you bring about your own end through your mischief," sniffed Lazuline.

"Thank you very kindly for the advice." With a flash of the rapier, Frederica slid it back into her sleeve, and the two of them sipped their beverages.

Ripple had been glad when Frederica had petted her head, and Frederica had enjoyed the sensation of Ripple's hair—the benefit was mutual. The same went for the relationship between Snow White and Frederica. Both parties benefited. That was why Frederica couldn't tear herself away. Even if Snow White tried to leave, Frederica would follow.

Frederica would hold on to whatever was useful until it served its purpose. Whether she would keep it in her possession any further depended on the thing in question. Should that something prove useful right now, if it was clear it would come back to bite her down the line, then perhaps it was best to discard it while it still served its purpose.

Afterword

It's been a long time, *anime*. Though for some time, this might be "nice to meet you," *anime*. My name is Asari Endou, *anime*. I like magical girls, and I write stories about magical girls, *anime*. It's my calling, *anime*.

I have a very important announcement to make in this afterword, *anime*. Those who are emotionally ready, please read onward, *anime*.

Some of you may have noticed from the cover ad strip—can you believe it?! Yes, yes, yes! *Magical Girl Raising Project* is being made into an anime! Ta-daa, *anime*!

First we had the manga adaptation, then the fan book, then the drama CD, and now the series is getting an anime adaptation, *anime*. We've done it, *anime*. I'm so glad, *anime*. I hope you'll continue to keep following *Magical Girl Raising Project*, *anime*.

Yes, as I have so casually touched on it, one manga volume, a drama CD, and a fan book have all been released between this novel and the previous book. All of them are very fun and interesting. They'll tug at your heartstrings. But if you think of that as part of the spice of happiness, it'll bring you more joy, you know?

I would very much love to write out previews and reviews of all of these things in this afterword, but I really don't have the space, so I hope you will check out the special site we've put up called the Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project as well as the Kono-Rano editorial department blog.

The URL is written on the cover ad strip, *anime*.

We also received assistance from Toranoana in producing a set of merchandise. They have a selection of items I can recommend to anyone who wants to try becoming a magical girl but doesn't want things to get gory. The merch is such a good deal—as long as you

have this stuff, even if you leap into the world of *Magical Girl Raising Project* tomorrow and are forced to fight bosses, you might be able to survive. Those who'd like to survive, please do check it out.

I took part in putting together the fan book. I campaigned to include Flame Flamey in it, which led people to think that she's one of my favorites. When the results of the popularity poll came in, I was struck with the added damage of an indescribable humiliation when a certain someone reported to me, smirking, "Flamey got zero votes" (it was over the phone, so I couldn't see their face, but judging from their tone, they were clearly smirking). But the completed fan book did turn out quite nice, with some bad things and some good. Fortune and misfortune are intertwined.

This afterword has been nothing but advertising so far. How awful. Since I have the opportunity, I'll advertise some more.

It's been settled that there will be a reprint of the previous volumes of *Magical Girl Raising Project*. To everyone who has been lamenting, "I want it, but they don't have it!" because inventory was small and stock was low, I'm sorry for such a long wait. There should be stacks upon stacks of *Magical Girl Raising Project* in bookstores all over the country by now. At least, that's how it was in the dream I had last night, so that's probably true. For the reprint, I reread the older books to look for typos, but I cut my finger on the *Restart* cover ad. It bled. Ouch.

Let's see… There's lots of other merch set for release, like a school calendar, that sort of thing. From here on out, *Magical Girl Raising Project* style will be all the rage. If you snatch them up now, you're bound to be a trendsetter come next year.

I'm not really doing this stuff for business-related reasons, however; it's more like I'm defending myself against people who might get angry at me: "You took a whole year off. What the hell are you doing?" Yes, I'm sorry. I regret my actions.

Another thing: The special Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project website is accepting submissions for original magical girls, too. I've been absolutely euphoric receiving so many wonderful magical-girl

designs.

In terms of superhuman strength, the magical girls I've received are about seven hundred million power, corresponding to about seven evil gods. I only got to see them right around the time I completed the characters for the new book (this one) for various reasons—potential copycat characters, that sort of thing.

It's only inevitable that a *Magical Girl Raising Project* reader who'd think, *All right, I'm gonna submit a magical girl!* would have similar tastes as me. Truly, thank you so very much.

The plan is for all those magical girls who were submitted to become active (business expression) a little further down the line. Please hold on for a bit longer. Thank you many times over.

Oh yes, and another thing—the Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project website is generally updated (or should be) once a month. There will be serialized short stories, notices about merch, and a section called MGRP News, where a dream duo that was impossible in the original story, Magical-Girl Hunter Snow White and the mascot Fav, do comedy together or have one-sided battles and stuff. It's a very fun site, so please do take a look. For the details, please check out the ads at the end of this book.

Now then, following the previous book, *Jokers*, we have *Aces*. The current series involves the foundation of the Magical Kingdom. Wait just a bit longer to see just what sort of title will be on the next book. I wrote the same thing before, a few books ago. It's like, just how much do you have to wait to satisfy me? Indeed, I think it's no good for me to think it'll be fine as long as you all wait for me. No good indeed.

So anyway, please wait for a bit longer.

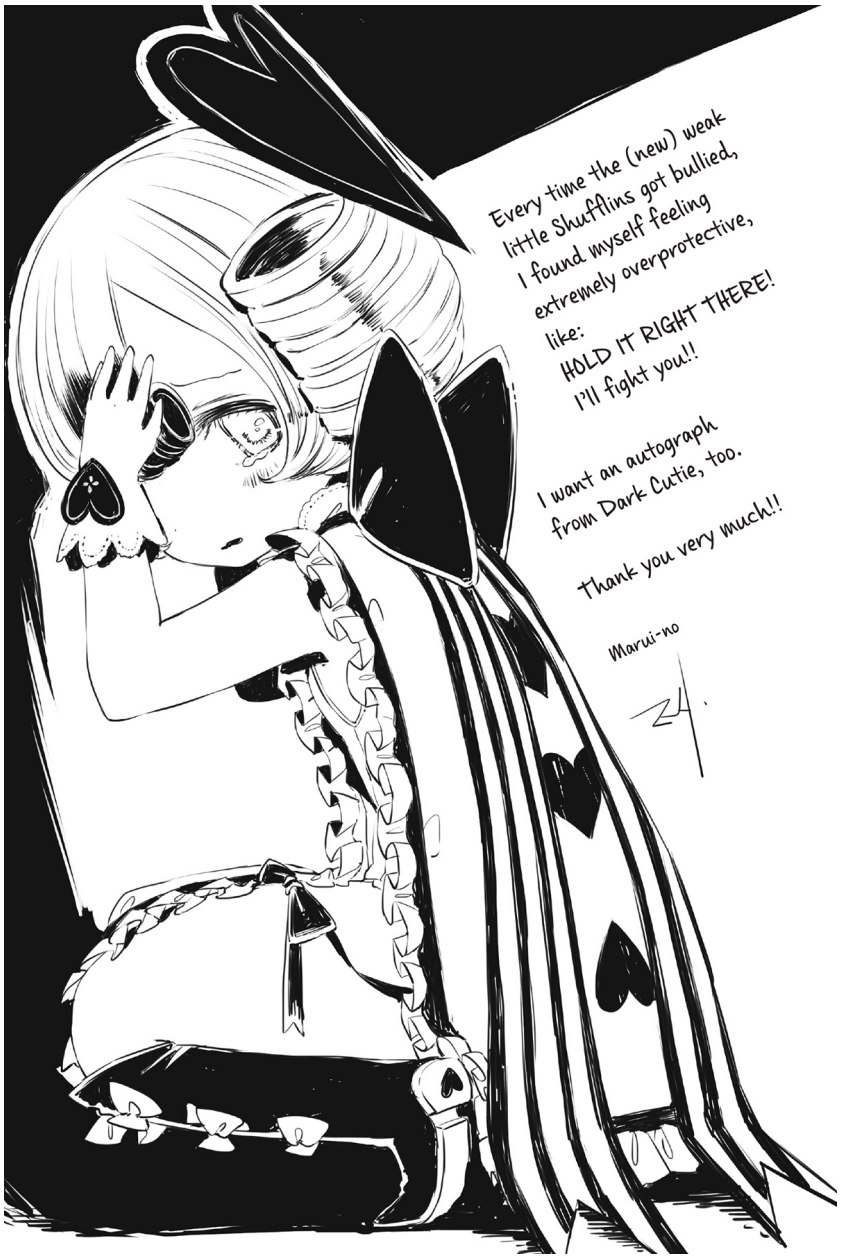
I'll write an amazing finale. I'm carefully reflecting on the aphorism that if you raise the bar, it's easier to go underneath it.

To everyone from the editorial department who has given me guidance, and S-mura: You've pulled more all-nighters again with this book, I'm sure. I'm sorry, and also, thank you.

Marui-no-sensei, thank you very much for the wonderful illustrations. I'm thinking it'd be nice if I could use that rejected Armor Arlie design—it was super cool, *too* cool, which I guess isn't

very magical girl–like.

To all the readers who purchased this book: Thank you very much. There's a lot planned with the manga, the anime, and many other developments as well, so please look forward to more in the future.


Every time the (new) weak little Shufflins got bullied, I found myself feeling extremely overprotective, like:
HOLD IT RIGHT THERE! I'll fight you!!
I want an autograph from Dark Cutie, too.
Thank you very much!!
Marui-no

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